

Ready or Not—Here I Come!, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 24:36–42

Code: 2373

INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, my friends and I played many outdoor games. The one my friends and I played most often was hide and seek. Somebody was chosen to close his eyes and count for a while until everyone else had a chance to hide somewhere. Then when the person was finished counting, he would open his eyes and say, "Ready or not, here I come!"

That statement can be applied to the text of Matthew 24:36-51, which deals with the second coming of Jesus Christ. There we read of the suddenness and unexpectedness of His return. In this lesson we'll be examining verses 36-42, and we'll study the rest in the next lesson.

LESSON

I. PINPOINTING THE LORD'S RETURN (v. 36)

"Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only."

Jesus told the disciples that the exact time of His return is unknown. The signs that precede His second coming have been clearly given throughout Matthew 24. Other signs that precede His return are mentioned in Revelation 6--18. The generation that is alive during the tribulation will see those signs (Matt. 24:34). People all around the world will witness those signs; they will be obvious. However the specific moment of Christ's return--the exact day and hour-- is not known.

A. The Exactness of the Time

Verses 13, 42, 44, and 50 all indicate that the exact moment of the Lord's return is unknown. The general time frame of the second coming will become obvious once people see all the signs in Matthew 24. The abomination of desolation will be a historical event. The wars, famines, pestilences, devastation, waters turning to blood, and increased darkness will all be noticed. But the exact day and hour of Christ's return won't be known; it will come unexpectedly. All we know is that the coming of the Son of Man is "immediately after the tribulation" (vv. 29-30).

Both Daniel and Revelation tell us that the Great Tribulation-- the second half of the tribulation--will be three and one-half years long, forty two months, or 1260 days (Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7; Rev. 12:14; 13:5). The second half begins with the abomination of desolation in Matthew 24:15. That's when the Antichrist will demand to be worshiped. Matthew 24:29-30 says that immediately after that period the

Son of Man will come. However we don't know exactly how long it will be before the kingdom is actually established. In Daniel 12:11-12 we read about a seventy-five day period following the tribulation, during which the kingdom will be established .

The tribulation will begin once the church is raptured. There will be three and one-half years of peace as the Antichrist politically rescues Israel and starts to revive what once comprised the Roman Empire. Then in the middle of the seven-year tribulation, he will desecrate the Temple in Jerusalem and demand that he be worshiped. The next three and one-half years will culminate with the return of Christ.

None of those things have happened yet. We don't know what generation they will come upon. It could be this generation; the church might be raptured any moment. And even those who do see the signs in Matthew 24 come to pass won't know the exact moment of Christ's return at the end of the tribulation. That is a secret.

B. The Explanation About the Time

1. It is not known by men

Jesus specifically stated in Matthew 24:36 that no man knows the day and hour of His coming. If men did know the exact moment of Christ's return, they would probably choose to live in sin right up until just before that moment. Christians might stop everything they are doing just to await the Lord's coming. Life would change considerably if you knew exactly when the Lord was going to come. People wouldn't make plans for the future; long-term relationships would be affected. So the Lord, in all His wisdom, has kept secret the time of Christ's return. He didn't want people to take advantage of such knowledge for their own selfish reasons.

2. It is not known by angels

Matthew 24:36 also says that the angels of heaven don't know the day and hour of Christ's return. The natural world (mankind) doesn't know, and neither does the supernatural world (the angels). The angels have constant access to God. In Isaiah 6 they hover around His throne awaiting His commands. In Matthew 18:10 we read they are face-to-face with God in intimate communion with Him. According to Matthew 13, angels will be the agents of judgment at the second coming. They are the reapers who will gather the wheat and tares, and throw the tares into a furnace of fire (vv. 37-42). Matthew 24:31 indicates that the angels will gather the believers who survive the tribulation. Yet in spite of all those things, the angels still do not know the exact moment of Christ's coming. God has chosen not to reveal it to them. Scripture doesn't tell us why.

3. It is not known by the Son

a) The comment

The better manuscripts of Matthew indicate that Matthew 24:36 should read, "Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, neither the Son" (emphasis added). Mark 13:32, which is a parallel passage, includes that phrase. The New American Standard and the New International Version correctly include "neither the Son" in Matthew 24:36.

b) The clarification

That Christ didn't know the time of His own return has created much discussion. How could Jesus

Christ, who is God, not know something? Since He is God, isn't He omniscient? That's easily explained if we understand some facts about the incarnation. Jesus Christ is fully God (John 1:1, 14), but when He became a man, He voluntarily restricted the use of His divine attributes (Phil. 2:6-8). He didn't put His deity or divine attributes aside; He simply restricted the use of them. He lived without using His omniscience unless the Father prescribed for Him to use it.

Christ's omniscience is obvious in some passages. In John 2:24-25 we read that He knows what's in the heart of every man. In John 3 Jesus answers a question that Nicodemus had in mind but hadn't yet asked (vv. 1-3). In His incarnation, Christ restricted the use of His omniscience to those things that the Father wanted Him to know. Philippians 2:7 says He took upon Himself the form of a servant. He submitted Himself to whatever the Father wanted Him to do, say, or know. In John 15:15 Jesus says to the disciples, "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." That verse explicitly states Jesus' knowledge was qualified by what the Father revealed to Him. Some of what He knew came through the Old Testament, some came from personal experiences during which He saw God's power, and some through direct revelation. Jesus didn't have to restrict the use of His omniscience. But He chose to act as a servant to redeem mankind. That Jesus humbled Himself and took upon Himself the form of a servant means He limited the use of His divine attributes, including His omniscience. Scripture says that as Jesus grew older He "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

I believe after Christ was resurrected, the day and hour of His return became known to Him. After He came out of the grave in His resurrection glory, He said this to the disciples: "All authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18). Shortly afterwards He said, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons [of the second coming], which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:7). He said only that the disciples wouldn't know the time of His return; He didn't include Himself as He did in Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32. So when Christ rose from the dead, He resumed full use of His attributes and therefore had full knowledge of when His second coming would be.

4. It is known by the Father

At the end of Matthew 24:36 Jesus says only the Father knows the time of the second coming. (Jesus always called the first member of the Godhead "Father" with only one exception: in Matthew 27:46 He said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" because He was temporarily separated from the Father as He was bearing all the sins of the world on the cross.) The word only is significant. Only the Father knew the time of the Second Coming when Jesus made that statement. Yet as we discussed, now that Christ is risen, He knows too.

C. The Expectation of the Time

God doesn't want mankind to know when the second coming will be because He wants every generation to live in expectation of it. He wants everyone to be prepared at all times. So ever since the New Testament era, Christians have always lived in eager anticipation of the second coming of Christ.

1. 1 Corinthians 1:6-7--"The testimony of Christ was confirmed in you; so that ye come behind in no gift, waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." The first generation church in Corinth anticipated Christ's return.

2. Hebrews 10:24-25--"Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." That was written as if those who received

the letter of Hebrews would witness Christ's return.

3. Philippians 3:20--"Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." We look to heaven in anticipation of Christ's coming.

4. James 5:8--"Be ye also patient, establish your hearts; for the coming of the Lord draweth near."

5. 1 Peter 4:7--"The end of all things is at hand; be ye, therefore, soberminded, and watch unto prayer."

6. 1 John 2:18--"Little children, it is the last time."

7. Revelation 22:20--"He who testifieth these things [Jesus] saith, Surely, I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

The writers of the New Testament didn't fully understand how much time would go by before the second coming of Christ, but they lived in expectation of it. Every generation should be prepared for His return. If we knew when Christ planned to return, then no one would live in expectation until just before the right moment.

Why Is Christ Waiting So Long Before He Returns?

1. He is permitting evil to run its course

Revelation 14:15-16 says, "Another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap; for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe. And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped." The imagery there is important: Only when grain is ripe is it harvested. And the Lord is waiting for the ripening of evil. God will not enact judgment on this world until the harvest is ripe-- until sin has run its course. He will wait until all evil has been revealed. It's hard to imagine that things could get any worse in our world, but that's what God is waiting for before He takes the sickle and pours out His judgment.

2. He is adding to His church

Paul wrote in Romans 11:25, "I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits: that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in." The phrase "the fullness of the Gentiles" refers to the gathering in of the church in this age. After the fullness of the time of the Gentiles (the church age), the Lord will then allow many Jewish people to become saved (Rom. 11:26) during the tribulation.

3. He is not bound by time

Second Peter 3:8 says, "Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." God doesn't keep a clock, yet we are creatures

of time. Thus what seems like a long time for us is no time at all to the eternal God. Verse 9 continues, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." God is waiting until all the Gentiles and Jewish people destined to become saved are redeemed. Then Christ will return.

a) The precedence

Backing up to verses 3-4 we read, "Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers [i.e., the patriarchs] fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." There are people who deny Christ will come. They say everything will continue as usual; nothing will ever change. But verses 5-6 say, "They willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water, by which the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished."

Those who say nothing has ever changed overlook the flood. God wiped out the entire world--except for eight people--in the flood (Gen. 7--8). There is physical evidence all over the globe to support that. Why did that flood come? Because God "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (Gen. 6:5). All things will not continue as they have. There is coming a time of judgment.

b) The prophecy

Second Peter 3:10 says, "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night." It will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Then we read that "the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and the works that are in it, shall be burned up." When the Lord returns to set up the millennial kingdom, the heavens and the earth will be dramatically changed. As Matthew 24 said, the stars will fall, and the moon and sun won't give light (v. 29). The waters and the terrain of the earth will be changed (Rev. 6:14; 8:8-9). There will be much chaos as the heavens and the earth are changed at the onset of the millennium. Then at the end of the millennial kingdom there will come a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1). Thus the changes in the heavens and the earth will occur in two phases: first there will be a modification of the universe when Jesus comes. Then there will be a completely new and eternal heaven and earth created at the end of the thousand-year kingdom.

The Lord created an unfallen world, and then it fell into sin. The world will be restored in some way at the beginning of Christ's earthly reign, but ultimately, the heavens and the earth will be completely re-created in eternity. We see the history of the universe in 2 Peter 3.

II. PREPARING FOR THE LORD'S RETURN (vv. 37-51)

Since no one knows the exact time of Christ's return, how should each generation respond, especially those who see the birth pains--the disasters, the changes on the face of the earth, and the abomination of desolation? We will examine three attitudes: alertness, readiness, and faithfulness. The last two we will look at in the next lesson.

A. Alertness (vv. 37-42)

1. The prediction (v. 37)

"As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

The flood is the only event in human history that comes close to illustrating what will happen in the end times, for the flood destroyed everything on earth. The attitude that prevailed during the time of Noah will be the attitude that prevails during the second coming.

When Noah told the people that God's judgment was near, they didn't care. Similarly, people during the end times will notice all the signs and wonders going on around them, but many of them won't consider what's happening and why. Hard to imagine, but true.

a) The extent of man's denial

(1) As seen in the future

Second Peter 3:3 says "there shall come in the last days scoffers." People will be using their computers and charts in an attempt to analyze the universe and explain scientifically why everything is going haywire. They will try to explain away the earthquakes and abnormal tide activity. They will try to figure out why there are abnormal changes in the heavens--why the sun and moon aren't working as they usually do. People will attempt to rationalize why the seas are bitter and why people are being massacred on an unprecedented scale. In so doing, they will completely overlook the truth in God's Word.

Men will be no different at the Lord's second coming than they were at His first coming. Many people saw Jesus, heard Him, and watched Him banish disease from the land of Palestine. They saw Him raise the dead. Yet they still didn't receive Him as Lord. In fact, the Jewish religious leaders concluded He was of the devil (Matt. 12:24). The people who lived at the same time Christ was on earth were selfish, sinful, and so devoid of spiritual perception that they didn't even recognize the Savior when He walked in their midst. Things won't be any different when people see the signs preceding Christ's coming.

(2) As seen in the past

In the beginning of Matthew 16, the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and asked Him to "show them a sign from heaven" (v. 1). They wanted Him to prove He was the Messiah, but they had already seen many signs by this time. Jesus answered, "When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather; for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today; for the sky is red and overcast. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky, but can ye not discern the signs of the times?" (vv. 2-3). They were great at figuring out the weather, but they didn't have a clue about what God was doing in their midst.

The religious leaders had shut their minds to the truth of God. Throughout Israel's history they had ignored the miracles and warnings of God's prophets, going to the extent of murdering them. They eventually even murdered the Son of God. When the signs preceding Christ's return come to pass, the world will be just as blind as the Jewish leaders were. People will not perceive what is happening. They will try to explain everything away.

b) The extent of man's decadence

(1) As seen in the future

Second Thessalonians 2:6-8 tells us that during the tribulation, the Holy Spirit will remove its restraining effect on evil. Right now the Spirit is holding back the evil of the world, but it seems that as time goes on, He's slowly pulling back the restraints. And when the tribulation comes, evil will be allowed to run its full course. Demons that are temporarily bound in hell will overrun the earth (Rev.

9:1-3). The archangel Michael will fight with Satan, and Satan will be cast out of heaven to earth (Rev. 12:7-9). So with Satan and his demons running loose all over the earth, sin will become rampant. The phrase "mystery of iniquity" is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 to describe the extent of the evil of that time. It will be worse than any other time in history. The world will be preoccupied more than ever with sin, illicit sex, drugs, alcohol, and materialism. People will hate God, each other, and the truth.

(2) As seen in the past

During the tribulation, the world will be like it was in the days of Noah. According to 2 Peter 2:5, Noah was "a preacher of righteousness." He built a large ark in the middle of the desert and told people there would be a flood. They laughed at him because it had never rained on the earth up to that time. He spent 120 years building the ark (Gen. 6:3) and was probably asked the same question over and over, "Why are you building that boat?" Noah most likely answered, "Because God is going to judge the wicked of this world and only those who put their faith in Him are going to escape. Would you like to join me?" For 120 years people went on with life as usual and ignored Noah's preaching. However Noah didn't let that discourage him; he continued building the ark, which was about the size of a modern ocean liner. The scoffers didn't want to hear about God's judgment; they probably came up with all kinds of reasons not to believe Noah.

2. The parallel (vv. 38-39)

"In the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and know not until the flood came, and took them all away, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

a) Noah's preaching

Noah preached for 120 years, and those who heard him didn't believe him until they saw the heavy rains that started the flood. During the Great Tribulation there will be many signs warning of Christ's coming. There will be many preachers of righteousness in that time: the 144,000 Jewish evangelists and the multitude of Gentiles in Revelation 7, and the two witnesses sent from God in Revelation 11. There will also be an angel who preaches the gospel message to all the people on the earth (Rev. 14:6). But many people will not believe what they hear until it's too late. They will come up with all kinds of reasons to scoff and laugh. If people were that wicked in the days of Noah, you can imagine how much worse they will be in the last days before Christ's coming.

b) The people's response

Matthew 24:38 says that before the flood, people were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." Eating and drinking aren't sins, neither is marriage. The problem was that life went on as usual. The people lived as if nothing would happen to them. They disregarded Noah's preaching. Social, family, and business life went on as usual. That's exactly what will happen during the tribulation.

Sometimes when we envision the tribulation in our minds, we think surely the terrible events in that time will cause people to recognize that the end of the world is coming. There will be some people who recognize it; they will be the redeemed remnant. But in general there will be a massive, worldwide rejection of anything that is associated with God.

Everyone but Noah's family rejected God. And by the time Noah had shut the door of his ark and the rains began, it was too late for anyone to change his mind. Once the floodwaters started rising, I'm sure some people knocked on the door of the ark. But it was too late. Matthew 24:39 says they didn't realize what was happening "until the flood came." The Greek word translated "flood" is kataklusmos, from which we get the English word cataclysm. It means "to wash down." All the wicked people were washed away into damnation and judgment. Verse 39 continues, "So shall also the coming of the Son of man be." The same thing will happen at the second coming. Life will go on as usual until it's

too late.

The people in Noah's generation were warned for 120 years. The generation that lives through the tribulation will be warned. In reality, we are all being warned now. Ever since the New Testament was written, it has warned every generation that Christ could come at any time. But most people won't heed the warning until they are swept away in judgment.

3. The purging (vv. 40-41)

"Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left."

a) The specifics

The Greek word translated "one" is masculine in verse 40 and feminine in verse 41. So verse 40 talks about two men in a field verse 41 speaks of two women grinding at a mill. In Bible times, the men of Israel generally worked in the fields, and the women grinded what was harvested by the men. Jesus was saying that in the routine of life, one will be taken and the other left when Christ returns.

b) The separation

Some people believe Jesus was referring to the rapture, but as we've seen already, the rapture will happen prior to the tribulation. Since verses 40-41 follow right after what verse 39 said about people's being washed away in judgment, we know that Jesus was referring to judgment--only now in reference to the second coming. The people who are taken will be taken in judgment, and those who are left will inhabit Christ's kingdom. They are those who became saved during the tribulation. So one day while people are working, the unbelievers will be taken in judgment and the believers will be preserved.

The judgment process is described in greater detail in Matthew 25:31-46, where the sheep (believers) are separated from the goats. The sheep will remain to inhabit eternal kingdom, but the goats will be sent into everlasting punishment. Thus when the millennial begins, there will be believers on earth who will inhabit it. They will be those who lived through the Antichrist's reign of terror. All the ungodly will be swept away in judgment.

Acts 2:19-21 says that in the midst of all the destruction during the tribulation, anyone who calls "on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21). Even those who call upon the Lord just before judgment will be in the kingdom along with those who were believers during the tribulation. They will be the ones who populate the earth and have children during the millennium .

4. The preparation (v. 42)

"Watch, therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come."

No one will know the exact time of Christ's return. Even the generation alive during the tribulation won't know. People will be going through life as usual, and suddenly some will be taken and others left. There is coming a day when the door to the kingdom will be shut forever. The parable of the virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) confirms that.

Who Will Be Spared from the Wrath to Come?

The Lord knows whom He will leave and whom He will take. Malachi 3:16-17 says, "They that feared the Lord spoke often one to another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will

spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him." God knows who belongs to Him.

In 2 Peter 2 we read, "If God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; and spared not the old world, but saved Noah, the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; and, turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those that after should live ungodly, and delivered just Lot ... the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (vv. 4-7, 9). Since God knew how to get Lot out of Sodom and Gomorrah, Noah out of the flood, and the holy angels out of the devastation of heaven, He will surely know how to sort out the righteous and unrighteous in the judgment to come.

The second coming of Christ is not fantasy or fiction--it is fact. Just as the first coming of Christ was prophesied and fulfilled, so will the second coming. If Christ is not your Lord now, He will become your Lord in eternity by exercising His right to send you into eternal punishment. Philippians 2:10 says there is coming a day when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." Some will bow in adoration; others will bow in terror. Willingly or unwillingly, every person will profess that Christ is Lord.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What do we know about the moment that Christ's will return to earth? Support your answer with Scripture
2. What did Jesus say regarding the knowledge of when He will return? Be specific (Matt. 24:36).
3. What confusion arises with the phrase "neither the Son" in Matthew 24:36? What explanation can be given to eliminate that confusion?
4. Why doesn't God want mankind to know when Christ will return?
5. What Scriptures verify the early church's anticipation of the second coming?
6. What are some reasons that Christ is waiting before He returns to earth?
7. What prediction is made in Matthew 24:37?
8. How will most people respond to the events of the tribulation?
9. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8, what will happen during the tribulation?
10. While Noah built the ark, he warned people of God's coming judgment. How did they respond (Matt. 24:38-39)?

11.What was Jesus talking about when He said, "One shall be taken, and the other left" in Matthew 24:40-41?

12.What exhortation does Christ conclude with in Matthew 24:42?

Pondering the Principles

1.Completely understanding how Christ's human nature and divine nature worked together is impossible. Yet the Bible confirms that Jesus was indeed God incarnate. Through the ages people have said that Christ couldn't be God because He didn't know the time of His second coming (Mark 13:32). Read the following verses: Matthew 17:27; John 1:47-48; 2:25; and 13:38 with 18:27. What do those verses confirm about Christ's knowledge? What are some other affirmations of Christ's deity that you can think of from Scripture? Here's a good way to see Christ's deity on display: Each day this week, read three chapters from the book of John. As you read, keep a record of all the passages you find that affirm Christ's deity. Share what you learn with others.

2.It's sobering to read Scripture passages that warn of God's future judgment upon the world. Such passages help us to have greater compassion for unbelievers. The apostle Paul suggests one action you can take in response: "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men" (1 Tim. 2:1 NASB). God wants us to cultivate a habit of praying consistently for all men. You can start now by praying regularly for unsaved relatives, friends, and co-workers.

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