

ADVENT
for
EVERYONE
MATTHEW
A Daily Devotional
N. T.
WRIGHT

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WEEK 1: A TIME TO WATCH

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The Unexpected Visit: Matthew 24.36–44

³⁶‘Nobody knows what day or time this will happen,’ Jesus went on. ‘The angels in heaven don’t know it, and nor does the son; only the father knows. ³⁷You see, the royal appearing of the son of man will be like the days of Noah.

³⁸‘What does that mean? Well, in those days, before the flood, they were eating and drinking, they were getting married and giving children in marriage, right up to the day when Noah went into the ark. ³⁹They didn’t know about it until the flood came and swept them all away. That’s what it’ll be like at the royal appearing of the son of man.

⁴⁰‘On that day there will be two people working in the field. One will be taken, the other will be left. ⁴¹There will be two women grinding corn in the mill. One will be taken, the other will be left.

⁴²‘So keep alert! You don’t know what day your master will come. ⁴³But bear this in mind: if the householder had known what time of night the burglar was going to come, he would have stayed awake and wouldn’t have let his house get broken into. ⁴⁴So you too must be ready! The son of man is coming at a time you don’t expect.’

It was a fine Saturday afternoon in the heat of summer. The family, some on holiday from work, were relaxing in the house and the garden. Books and magazines were lying around the place, along with coffee mugs, newspapers and packets of biscuits. Everything had the look of the sort of cheerful untidiness that a large family can create in about an hour.

Suddenly there was a ring at the doorbell. Wondering vaguely which friend might be calling I went to answer it, dressed as I was in very casual clothes. There outside, to my horror, was a party of 30 or so well-dressed visitors. They had arranged, many months before, to come to look at the house, because of its historic associations. And neither I nor the family had remembered a thing about it.

You can imagine the next five minutes. I suggested that the visitors went into the garden for a little while ('to get a good look at the house from the outside'), and then mobilized the family to clear everything up. Within minutes everything was clean and tidy. The children retreated into bedrooms. We opened the front door again and the visit went ahead.

You can tidy a house in a few minutes, if you put your mind to it. But you can't reverse the direction of a whole life, a whole culture. By the time the ring on the doorbell happens it's too late. That's what this passage in Matthew 24 is about.

It has been applied to two different kinds of event, neither of which was what Jesus himself had in mind (though some think Matthew was already looking further ahead). We had better look at them first.

On the one hand, a great many readers have seen here a warning to Christians to be ready for the second coming of Jesus. This goes, obviously, with an interpretation of the earlier part of the chapter which sees the 'coming' of the son of man not as his vindication, his exaltation to heaven, but as his return to earth. We have been promised, in Acts 1, 1 Thessalonians 4 and many, many other passages, that one day, when God remakes the entire world, Jesus himself

will take centre stage. He will ‘appear’ again, as Paul and John put it (e.g. Colossians 3.4; 1 John 3.2). Since nobody knows when that will be, it is vital that all Christians should be ready all the time.

On the other hand, many other readers have seen here a warning to Christians to be ready for their own death. Whatever precisely one thinks will happen immediately after death – and that’s a subject devout Christians have often disagreed about – it’s clearly important that we should, in principle, be ready for that great step into the unknown, whenever it is asked of us. That’s one of many reasons why keeping short accounts with God, through regular worship, prayer, reading of scripture, self-examination and Christian obedience, matters as much as it does.

You can read the passage in either of these ways, or both. Often the voice of God can be heard in scripture even in ways the original writers hadn’t imagined – though you need to retain, as the control, a clear sense of what they *did* mean, in case you make scripture ‘prove’ all kinds of things which it certainly doesn’t. It is vital, therefore, to read the passage as it would have been heard by Matthew’s first audience. A great national crisis was going to sweep over Jerusalem and its surrounding countryside at a date that was, to them, in the unknown future – though we now know it happened in AD 70, at the climax of the war between Rome and Judaea. Something was going to happen which would devastate lives, families, whole communities: something that was a terrible, frightening event and at the same time an event that was to be seen as ‘the coming of the son of man’, or the *parousia*, the ‘royal appearing’ of Jesus himself. And the whole passage indicates what this will be. It will be the swift and sudden

sequence of events that will end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The point this passage makes comes in three stages:

First, nobody knows exactly when this will be, only that it will be within a generation (verse 36).

Second, life will go on as normal right up to the last minute. That's the point of the parallel with the time of Noah. Until the flood came to sweep everything away, ordinary life was carrying on with nothing unusual.

Third, it will divide families and work colleagues down the middle: 'One will be taken and one left.' This doesn't mean (as some have suggested) that one person will be 'taken' away by God in some kind of supernatural salvation, while the other is 'left' to face destruction. If anything, it's the opposite: when invading forces sweep through a town or village, they will 'take' some off to their deaths and 'leave' others untouched.

The result – and this is the point Jesus is most anxious to get across to his disciples, who by this stage must have been quite puzzled as to where it was all going – is that his followers must stay awake. They must be alert and keep watch – like people who know that surprise visitors are coming sooner or later but who don't know exactly when.

The warning was primarily directed to the situation of dire emergency in the first century, after Jesus' death and resurrection and before his words about the Temple came true. But they ring through subsequent centuries, and into our own day. We too live in turbulent and dangerous times. Who knows what will happen next week, next year? It's up to each church, and each individual Christian, to answer the question: are you ready? Are you awake? Are you keeping watch?

For Reflection or Discussion

How do you interpret this passage? How do you stand ready, as it exhorts?

WEEK 1: MONDAY

The Parable of the Weeds: Matthew 13.24–35

²⁴He put another parable to them.

‘The kingdom of heaven,’ he said, ‘is like this! Once upon a time a man sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵While the workers were asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds in among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the crop came up and produced corn, then the weeds appeared as well.

²⁷‘So the farmer’s servants came to him.

“‘Master,” they said, “didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?”

²⁸“This is the work of an enemy,” he replied.

“‘So,” the servants said to him, “do you want us to go and pull them up?”

²⁹“No,” he replied. “If you do that you’ll probably pull up the wheat as well, while you’re collecting the weeds. ³⁰Let them both grow together until the harvest. Then, when it’s time for harvest, I will give the reapers this instruction: ‘First gather the weeds and tie them up in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

³¹He put another parable to them.

‘The kingdom of heaven,’ he said, ‘is like a grain of mustard seed, which someone took and sowed in his field. ³²It’s the smallest of all the seeds, but when it grows it turns into the biggest of the shrubs. It becomes a tree, and the birds in the sky can then come and nest in its branches.’

³³He told them another parable.

‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven,’ he said, ‘which a woman took and hid inside three measures of flour, until the whole thing was leavened.’

³⁴Jesus said all these things to the crowds in parables. He didn’t speak to them without a parable. ³⁵This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet:

I will open my mouth in parables,
I will tell the things that were hidden
Since the very foundation of the world.

‘Why doesn’t God *do* something?’

That is perhaps the most frequent question that people ask Christian leaders and teachers – and those of some other faiths, too. Tragedies happen. Horrific accidents devastate lives and families. Tyrants and bullies force their own plans on people and crush opposition, and they seem to get away with it. And sensitive souls ask, again and again: why is God apparently silent? Why doesn’t he step in and stop it?

These parables are not a direct answer to the question, and probably no direct answer can be given in this life. But they show, through the various different stories, that God’s sovereign rule over the world isn’t quite such a straightforward thing as people sometimes imagine.

Would people really like it if God were to rule the world directly and immediately, so that our every thought and action were weighed, and instantly judged and if necessary punished, in the scales of his absolute holiness? If the price of God stepping in and stopping a campaign of genocide were that he would also have to rebuke and restrain every other evil impulse, including those we all still know and cherish within ourselves, would we be prepared to pay that

THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS (13.24–35)

price? If we ask God to act on special occasions, do we really suppose that he could do that simply when we want him to, and then back off again for the rest of the time?

These parables are all about waiting and watching; and waiting and watching are what we all find difficult. The farmer waits for the harvest-time, watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside the wheat. Not only the farmer, but also the birds wait for the tiny mustard seed to grow into a large shrub. The woman baking bread must wait for the leaven to spread its way through the dough until the whole loaf is mysteriously leavened. And that's what God's kingdom is like.

Jesus' followers, of course, didn't want to wait. If the kingdom was really present where Jesus was, coming to birth in what he was doing, then they wanted the whole thing at once. They weren't interested in God's timetable. They had one of their own, and expected God to conform to it.

Notice, in particular, what the servants say about the weeds. They want to go straight away into the cornfield and root out the weeds. The farmer restrains them, because life is never that simple. In their zeal to rid the field of weeds they are very likely to pull up some wheat as well.

Did Jesus, perhaps, have an eye here on the revolutionary groups of his day, only too ready to step into God's field and pull up what looked like weeds? There were many groups, including some of the Pharisees, who were eager to fight against pagans on the one hand and against compromised Jews on the other. These 'servants' may have intended to do God's will. They were longing for God to act, and were prepared to help him by acting themselves. But part of Jesus' whole campaign is to say that the true

kingdom of God doesn't come like that, because God himself isn't like that.

At the heart of the parable of the weeds and the wheat is the note of patience – not just the patience of the servants who have to wait and watch, but the patience of God himself. God didn't and doesn't enjoy the sight of a cornfield with weeds all over the place. But nor does he relish the thought of declaring harvest-time too soon, and destroying wheat along with weeds.

Many Jews of Jesus' time recognized this and spoke of God's compassion, delaying his judgment so that more people could be saved at the end. Jesus, followed by Paul and other early Christian writers, took the same view. Somehow Jesus wanted his followers to live with the tension of believing that the kingdom was indeed arriving in and through his own work, and that this kingdom would come, would fully arrive, not all in a bang but through a process like the slow growth of a plant or the steady leavening of a loaf.

This can sometimes seem like a cop-out today, and no doubt it did in Jesus' day as well. Saying that God is delaying his final judgment can look, outwardly, like saying that God is inactive or uncaring. But when we look at Jesus' own public career it's impossible to say that God didn't care. Here was one who was very active, deeply compassionate, battling with evil and defeating it – and still warning that the final overthrow of the enemy was yet to come.

We who live after Calvary and Easter know that God did indeed act suddenly and dramatically at that moment. When today we long for God to act, to put the world to rights, we must remind ourselves that he has already done so, and that what we are now awaiting is the full

THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS (24.1–14)

outworking of those events. We wait with patience, not like people in a dark room wondering if anyone will ever come with a lighted candle, but like people in early morning who know that the sun has arisen and are now watching for the full brightness of midday.

For Reflection or Discussion

How do you understand God's silence? How does Jesus' insistence on patience here challenge you?

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