

The revolution suddenly wins out—Matthew 24:36-51

Theme: The second part of Jesus' answer to the disciples' question is a call to sober and focussed discipleship lived constantly in the light of Jesus' return

Having answered the first part of the disciples' question (v3) with a detailed prophecy about the impending destruction of the temple, Jesus now turns to the second part. But now there is no timetable of events, no signs that point to his return being imminent. Rather, Jesus calls his followers to sober and focussed discipleship, each day lived according to the values of his Kingdom and in the light of his imminent return.

Questions:

1. How do we feel when we read passages of scripture like this one—comforted? Nervous? Confused? [be honest with each other]
2. What are the clues that Jesus has changed the subject in v36? [look at the notes if that helps]
3. How do we feel about the fact that Jesus doesn't know when 'that day' (v36) will come?
4. What do you think are the similarities between the days of Noah and the days we live in?
5. Is Jesus coming back as saviour or judge or both? How does the passage help us answer this question?
6. What images does Jesus use to tell us that his return will be sudden and unexpected? What other contemporary pictures could we use?
7. How do we understand 'taken' in v40-41? Is it a good or bad thing? [the notes will help you with this]
8. If we are the servant of the householder in the parable (v45-51), how does the master want us to live?
9. What does it mean to 'watch' or 'wait' for his coming? Is this an active thing? If so, in what way?
10. How can we get on with our lives *and* live as though we are not entangled in the things of this world (1 Corinthians 7:31)? Does Paul give us any help here?
11. Is the second coming of Jesus something we look forward to? Why?

Your stories:

Potted summary

A change in subject matter in v36 is flagged up by the use of 'now concerning', the singular 'that day' and a different word for 'coming'. Jesus is now answering the second part of the disciples' question (v3), talking about a single event that will not be accompanied by signs but will come out of the blue when we least expect it. The answer that stretches to the end of chapter 25 begins with a call to be alert and live a Jesus-honouring life.

More over the page....

What the passage is about....

Jesus has answered the first part of the question his disciples asked him in v3. He has told them when 'these things' [the destruction of the temple] will happen (24:1-35). Now he turns his attention to the second part about his coming and the end of the age (24:36-25:41).

You'll recall that in our discussion of the first section of this chapter (v1-14), we asked whether the disciples had in fact asked one question or two. This was because they expected the destruction of the temple to coincide with the end of the world and the coming of Christ in glory (the *parousia*—we'll explain what this word means in a moment). So, they thought they were asking a single question in two parts.

Further, in our study of v15-35, we noted that 'the end of the age' refers to Jesus' enthronement (in fulfilment of Daniel 7:13-14 picked up in v30) which indicates the arrival of his Kingdom and the overthrow of the old age symbolised by the temple.

Jesus, however, is very careful in his answer of the disciples' question(s) to keep separate his prediction about the destruction of the temple and his 'coming' on 'that day', the day of judgement.

We see this clearly in three of the statements he makes in v36-37 at the opening of his long answer to the second part of their question.

Firstly, he uses the word *parousia*. There are two Greek words that mean 'coming'—*parousia* and *erchomai*. The disciples ask Jesus about his *parousia* in v3. Jesus speaks about his *erchomai* in v30 because that is the word used in Daniel 7:13-14 where, as we saw last time, it meant coming to God in heaven and **not** coming to earth. He then uses the word *parousia* in v37 (having used it in v27 to contrast his return to earth with his accession to his heavenly rule, the earthly sign of which is the destruction of the temple).

Parousia was the word used to indicate the arrival of a special visitor. It was particularly used whenever Caesar visited a city in the empire. It denotes a spectacular coming that you could not miss. When Caesar arrived somewhere, he was preceded by messengers, accompanied by soldiers and expected the leaders of the city he was visiting to come out to meet him and to escort him back into the city. No one would be in any doubt that Caesar was arriving. That is the picture Jesus has in mind when he speaks of his *parousia* from 24:36-25:41.

Secondly, he doesn't know when this will happen. Despite being able to predict in some detail the signs leading up to the overthrow of Jerusalem, he says that only the Father knows when his *parousia* will occur and there will no signs indicating that it is imminent.

Thirdly, he refers to this event as a singular 'day' or 'hour' (24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13) rather than the plural 'those days' that he used when referring to the overthrow of the temple (24:19, 22, 29).

The term 'Day of the Lord' was a term the Old Testament used to describe the day when God comes to judge the earth. And it is clear as Jesus answers the second part of the disciples' question that he too is talking about a day of judgement, when all will be called to account by the Son of Man. We see this clearly in the final story in 25:31-46 but it is referred to in the parables that precede it.

This first section of Jesus' long answer to the second part of the disciples' question makes two basic points about the event and our relation to it:

1) sudden and unexpected

Unlike the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple which will be preceded by a series of 'signs' that Jesus has spelled out in v4-35, his *parousia* will come suddenly out of the blue.

He uses three dramatic pictures to illustrate this:

i) flood: Jesus is, of course, referring to the days of Noah but that does not become clear until the end of v38. Floods come in a rush, out of nowhere, often with no warning. People going about their daily business, doing special things that required weeks, even months of planning (weddings), are suddenly swept away. People were partying until the flood came and carried them off. It will be the same when Jesus returns.

Some have suggested that being 'taken' in v40-41 is a good thing. They suggest that believers are being spirited away to a place of safety before horrible things happen on earth prior to the second coming (the theory is sometimes referred to as 'the rapture'). But this is the opposite of what Jesus is saying here. People were 'taken' by the flood (39), meaning swept away to their deaths by the rising, rushing water. Similarly, people will be 'taken' when Jesus comes again, swept away unexpectedly to judgement.

The trouble with theories about 'the rapture' is that they are based on a mistaken view that there will be obvious signs before Jesus' *parousia* that tell us it's

near. But the key point that Jesus is making in this long section is that there will be no signs. His return as judge will come out of the blue.

ii) burglars: people who break into your house do not advertise the fact that they are coming—otherwise we'd be ready for them! So it is with Jesus. He'll come at an hour when we don't expect him (v42, 44)

iii) returning master: the longest parable in this section concerns a householder who goes away on business and leaves his slave in charge. The thing about travel in the ancient world was that it was an unpredictable business. There were no timetables, journeys were interrupted by bad weather, unexpected illness, bandits on the road, war in the country being visited. The master's return would be sudden and unexpected—whatever he'd said before he left (50).

The *parousia* of the Son of Man will likewise be sudden and unexpected (v39b, 44b, 50). There will be no 'signs' alerting to us to the fact that it is just around the corner.

2) sober and focussed

So, this means we need to be ready all the time (v42, 44). How can we do that? It means doing two things that, at first sight, seem contradictory:

i) waiting for the coming king: Martin Luther said that we should live each day as though it were our last. We should not be so caught up in the things of this world, the present age, that we lose sight of Jesus. Paul reminded the Corinthians that this world is passing away, so it's best not to invest our hearts in it (1 Corinthians 7:31). Rather let's stay focused on Jesus. This happens as we withdraw from life for regular periods to read scripture to learn about Jesus, pray and seek his presence in everything we do.

ii) working for his Kingdom: such waiting, however, is not about being idle, airily gazing at the sky, looking for Jesus to hove into view. Waiting is about the active pursuit of his Kingdom and its values energised by his Spirit. So we don't live like the wicked servant, abusing one another, adopting the values of the surrounding culture (v48-49). Rather we do the opposite, so we will be found doing the very things Jesus wants us to be doing when he returns—whenever that is.

So, we not only pray 'thy Kingdom come' (6:10), but we live lives that are shaped by its values, so others will recognise through us that Jesus is the coming king and want to serve him in anticipation of his imminent return.