

# Ready or Not

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Matthew 24:36-44

Sermon Series:  
iReady?

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Shortly after I became a Christian, someone handed me the book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. The book was on the best-seller list and sold 28 million copies, so I wasn't the only one reading it. Author Hal Lindsey interpreted Matthew 24 to mean that Jesus would return within one generation of the rebirth of the state of Israel, which occurred in 1948. Since a generation in the Bible is 40 years, that would date the return of Christ to occur sometime in the 1980s.

Passages like the one I read from Matthew 24 have served as a happy hunting ground for Christians who have tried to pinpoint the date of Jesus' return. William Miller convinced thousands of people to quit their jobs, give away their possessions and prepare for Christ's return on October 22, 1874. One of those he influenced, Charles Russell, revised the date of Christ's return to 1878. The date was then recalculated to 1914. When Christ did not return bodily in 1914, Russell and his followers, known today as Jehovah's Witnesses, claimed that Jesus came spiritually in 1914 to begin his invisible reign over the earth.

For the next three Sundays, our sermons will focus on the coming of Jesus. Christians talk plenty this time of year about Jesus' first coming at Bethlehem. But we

don't talk much about his second coming, which is rather odd, given how often Jesus speaks about it. For every single prophecy in Scripture about the first coming of Christ, there are eight prophecies dealing with Christ's second coming. Maybe these apocalyptic predictions scare us off. Since we don't want to be identified with the hype, we avoid the issue entirely. Or maybe we prefer the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes, asleep on the hay. We find the image of Jesus as a conquering king rather unsettling.

Matthew 24 is not an easy chapter to unravel. For starters, Jesus flips back and forth between two future events: the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (which occurred in 70AD) and his return (which is still pending).

What can we know of Jesus' return from Matthew 24? Jesus asserts three principle claims. First, he is, most assuredly, coming. Second, the day of his coming cannot be determined with any precision. Third, since we cannot determine when he will come, our only recourse is to be ready whenever he comes. Let's see what we can learn from each of Jesus' propositions.

First proposition—Jesus is coming. Jesus' coming will not be hidden. His coming will be as obvious as lightning in the sky (24:27). Jesus speaks in no

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uncertain terms in verses 37 and 39 about “the coming of the Son of Man” (Son of Man happens to be Jesus’ preferred self-designation). The Greek word Jesus uses for his coming, *parousia*, is normally employed to harbinger the coming of a king or emperor. Jesus is coming as a king to consummate the kingdom of God.

We are using three words this year to tell God’s Big Story in Scripture—creation, fall and redemption. Maybe, as Glenda suggested last Sunday, in view of Matthew 24, we ought to add a fourth word: consummation. Jesus is coming to consummate or bring to completion the kingdom of God.

People sensationalize the apocalyptic signs that will herald Jesus’ coming—wars, earthquakes and famines (24:6-7). Before we make too much of these signs in our day, let me remind you, these signs have always been with us.

Jesus’ coming will also be quite peaceful. People will be performing ordinary tasks, such as harvesting grain in the fields and grinding corn at the mill (24:40-41). One will be taken and one will be left. In Christian parlance, we call it “the rapture.” When Jesus comes, there will be a division of the house. Some will be taken up with Christ, and others will be left behind. In other words, Christ’s return means mercy for some and judgment for others. “He shall come again to judge the quick and the dead” is what we profess in the Apostles Creed.

First, Jesus teaches the certainty of his coming. Second, Jesus’ coming cannot possibly be determined with a day and time. The date of Jesus’ return is top secret. Jesus declares in verse 36, “No one knows about the day or the hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” If the angels don’t know and Jesus in the limitation of his humanity doesn’t know, what makes end-time prognosticators think they will know?

I like to know things. Even though Jesus says no one knows when he will return, there is something in me that wants to figure it out. But no one will be able to figure it out. Jesus puts the kibosh on determining the precise date of his return. Evidently, some Christians didn’t get the memo.

When will Jesus come? Only God knows.

There are limits to what God wants us to know. That’s why God put the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in the Garden of Eden. We can eat from every tree in the Garden, but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is off limits. I’ve often thought if God didn’t want us to eat from this tree, why did he put it there in the first place? It’s there to remind us that we are not God. We can be a lot of things on God’s good earth, but we can’t be God.

Some things are simply off limits. There are limits to what God wants us to know. The precise date of Jesus’ coming falls into this category.

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Actually, Jesus' coming will surprise people. Jesus as much as says so in verse 44: "The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

Jesus illustrates his point by using the image of a thief in verse 43. Thieves don't make appointments. They don't call you to tell you when they will be robbing your house. Thieves use the element of surprise to their advantage. That's why they come in the middle of the night.

The element of surprise keeps us on our toes. We must be prepared for robbers—that's why we keep our doors locked and install elaborate security systems. Paul writes in 1st Thessalonians that Jesus will come like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). His coming will surprise people.

First, Jesus asserts he is, most assuredly, coming. Second he tells us that the time of his coming cannot possibly be determined. So, third, our only recourse is to be ready whenever he comes. "Therefore keep watch" is what Jesus says in verse 42. Keep watch is spoken in present imperative, so the force of the verb is to keep on watching. The Greek word for watch, *gregorio*, is where we derive the name Gregory, meaning watchful or vigilant. Early bishops and popes took the name Gregory because of their role in watching over the people of God.

Jesus wants to make sure no one misses his point about being prepared for his coming. That's why he circles back to the same

theme in verse 44: "So, you must be ready." Vigilance, not calculation, is the order of the day.

The market today is flooded with gadgets like iPhones and iPods. That's what made me think of the title for this sermon series—"iReady." Ask yourself--am I ready for Christ's return? Are you doing anything to prepare for his return? Some day, you'll wish you had!

I saw a bumper sticker this week, "Jesus is coming." Perhaps, as a spoof on such people, other drivers display the bumper sticker, "Jesus is coming, look busy." I suspect this slogan is intended to be amusing, but the return of Christ is no laughing matter. It will take more than appearances to prove ourselves ready for his return.

There are only 19 days until Christmas. You have only 19 days left to send out your Christmas letters, put up your decorations, buy gifts for everyone and bake cookies. Am I making you anxious right now?

But wonder if there was no advanced warning to Christmas. Imagine what it would be like not to know which day Christmas would come. This would drive department stores and Amazon nuts. We would simply wake up one morning to discover it to be Christmas. If we had the expectation that every day could be Christmas, we would need to live in a constant state of readiness.

Living in a constant state of readiness is exactly Jesus' point. Live as though the end is always near. St. Augustine said, "The last day is hidden, so every day may be

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- E. King Gill

so regarded.” C.S. Lewis said something similar, “Precisely because we cannot predict the moment, we must be ready at all moments.”

The Texas A&M football stadium is known as “the home of the 12th man.” This tradition dates back to January 2, 1922. The Aggies traveled that day to play the nation’s top-rated team, Centre College. The A&M team was already short on players and, as the hard-fought game wore on, the coach wasn’t sure he would have 11 healthy players to finish the game. At halftime, he looked into the stands and saw a basketball player named E. King Gill, who had come to watch the game. The coach waved for Gill to come down to the field. He put a jersey on Gill and asked him to stand ready on the sidelines as the Aggie’s 12th man. Gill didn’t flinch. “Coach, if you need me, I’m ready to play.” Gill did not play that day, but he was ready. Incidentally, the Aggies won the game, 22-14.

Gill came to symbolize the 12th man in the lore of Aggie football. That’s why today the A&M student body stands for every game. It’s their way of supporting their team; of saying, “Coach, if you need me, I’m ready to play.”

King Gill was ready and willing to play that day. Are you ready for the possibilities God has for you? Scripture calls us to be prepared, standing ready as Jesus’ 12th disciple to share God’s love. Are you ready?

If Jesus is coming at an hour no one expects, Sunday, December 6th would be an ideal day for his return. I mean, nobody is expecting Jesus today. Nobody will be looking for Christ’s return in the malls or on the gridiron this afternoon.

Some of us have even become cynical about Christ’s coming. If it hasn’t happened in the last 2000 years, what makes us think it will happen now? The early church faced a similar cynicism. Peter warns about scoffers in the last days who will mock the return of Christ. “So what’s happened to the promise of his coming? Our ancestors are dead and buried, and everything’s going on just as it has from the first day of creation. Nothing’s changed.” (2 Peter 3:3-4).

The New Testament writers saw the delay in Jesus’ coming as merciful on God’s part, rather than negligent. The delay in Christ’s coming is seen as giving us one more day to give ourselves to Jesus Christ, to become his followers and take one step nearer to God.

