

Imagine that you work for Mr. Smith. He is a good and faithful employer. You enjoy working for him. You have even gained his trust. He gets a call one day. He is required to immediately leave to go to his homeland to look after some family matters. He calls you into his office. He asks you to take care of his business until he returns. You ask "for how long". He answers that he doesn't know. You will be unable to contact him because his homeland is in a remote part of the world where they have no power or cell phones. All he tells you is he will return some day.

Initially, you are very careful with his business. You follow his practices and instructions to a tee. You anticipate that he'll be gone for 3 months. 6 months max. 3 months come and go, 4, 5, 6 months and no word. You begin to realize this might be longer than you anticipated. Another 6 months?

1 year goes by. Another year goes by. 3 years go by. The business has your stamp on it. You do things mostly your way now. You begin to think that he's never coming back. You begin to make changes that you thought needed to be made a long time ago.

You let people go that you don't like. You bring in people that are your friends. You begin enjoy the money the business makes and take more of it for yourself even though you were just one of the employees when the owner left. 5 years go by – 10 years.

In year 20, the business is completely yours. At least you're in complete control. You've even begun explore the legal process of taking ownership of the business. The owner has been gone for 10 years. Surely there must be some legal precedent that gives you title given all the work you've put in. But the law comes back that you must wait 50 years before you can take ownership away from an absentee owner.

But no one even remembers that owner. You're the face of the business now. If it's going to grow, it needs to have your name. So you decide to change the name of the business. It used to be called Smith's. But you order a sign with your last name on it. You conclude that if the owner by some slim chance were to return one day, he would surely call you from wherever he went and give you notice of his coming. You'd have plenty of time to change the sign back.

The sign arrives and the installers take down the Smith sign. They have lifted up the sign with your name on it. They are about to attach it permanently to the building when you notice an old car coming down the road. "That car must be 20 years old" you think to yourself.

You remember a car like that from somewhere in your memory banks. It slows down as it approaches your business. You see the signal light go on and the car begin turning into the parking lot. Suddenly it hits you. It's the owner. He's returned. At the very moment when the sign with his name sits faded and broken down in the parking lot while the shiny new sign with your name on it sits awkwardly in place above the building waiting for final installation.

The car stops and out gets the owner. He looks at the Smith sign. He looks at the sign with your name. Then he looks at you. How will you explain the sign? How will you tell him that you've initiated proceedings to take over his business? How will you justify your dismissal of employees that he hired who were actually good but you just didn't like them? He can tell what's happening just by looking around. You realize that you were mistaken to assume that he'd never return. You are about to face the consequences of trying to take over a business that was not yours to take.

Sound far-fetched? Well, we may not be able to get our heads around how someone could go away and not contact the people they left behind in our highly technological world. But something like this has happened to all of us.

Jesus has gone away. He has entrusted us with a life to live while He's away. He's given us breath; bodies; a world in which to live; opportunities; skills; gifts; the Holy Spirit; the Bible and the church to guide us while He's away. But He could return any time. When that happens, what will He find? What will He discover about what we've done with what He gave us? How can we be ready for His return which maybe today or maybe in 20 years or a hundred years?

That's what we're going to talk about today as we continue our journey through Jesus' teaching on His return and the end of history. This started when Jesus left the temple on the Tuesday of his last week on earth. As He left, the disciples pointed out to Him the impressive buildings of the temple complex. Jesus responded by declaring that "not one stone would be left upon another. They would be thrown down." So He predicted the violent destruction of the temple. Jesus and the disciples then walk across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives. Jesus sits and the disciples ask "When will these things be?" What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

Matthew 24 and 25 contains Jesus' teaching in response. He warns them about the possibility of deception. He describes events that will happen indicating the birth pains or start of the end. Then He gives them some specifics that will point to the coming destruction of the temple. Within those specifics, I think He also foreshadows towards the end of the age. Last week we saw Jesus declare that His coming will be very public, earth shattering, powerful and glorious event. It will be the end of history as we know it.

Now Jesus becomes more specific about how the disciples and us need to live in anticipation of Jesus' return. So today I want to show you 2 more realities that Jesus unveils about His return. Then we will learn about how we can live today in joyful anticipation of His coming.

Matthew 24:32-51 (ESV)

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

⁴⁵ "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

If I could summarize this passage in one sentence, it would look something like this. **Since Jesus' return will be soon yet unexpected, we must learn to live awake and ready.** But how can someone's arrival be soon yet unexpected? What does it mean to live awake and ready?

So let's unpack this sentence to go deeper into Jesus' words. I think the first little parable about the fig tree teaches us that **Jesus will return soon (32-35)**. How do I get that? Well Jesus instructs the disciples to pay attention to the local fig tree. He says "as soon as its branch becomes tender and it puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near." To us, this is no great revelation. Of course we know that when trees begin putting out their leaves, spring has come and summer is near. But most trees in Israel's are a sort of an evergreen that don't lose their leaves. The fig tree

was somewhat unusual in that it actually did lose its leaves and grow new ones. So the parable is pretty simple. Just as you know summer is near when the fig tree sprouts its leaves, the disciples would know that Jesus' return was near when all these things that were talked about in verses 15-31 actually happen.

So how can I jump to "Jesus will return soon" when he says all these things still have to happen? Well there's a couple of reasons. First, I believe "all these things" refers to the events surrounding the destruction of the temple. The disciples asked "when will these things be," referring to the tearing down of its stones. We talked about the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place last week. They needed to flee when they saw it. They also needed to guard against those who would deceive them about the end. And all those things happened. The temple was destroyed in 70. So I take this to mean "all these things" have already happened.

Then look carefully at what Jesus says in verse 33. "When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates." What does it mean when someone is at the very gates? Well it's like the king has arrived and is coming into the city. It's not like he's 10 kilometers out at the last town before the city. He has arrived at the very gates. There is no more time for preparation. It's too late to start cooking the meal for his arrival when he's at the very gates. It's too late to decorate the courtyard or assemble the people. It's too late to get your life ready for His coming when He's basically arrived.

Jesus will return soon. The problem arises with our understanding of the word soon. We think that's just slightly less than immediately. What does soon mean to you? 20 minutes? A couple of days? Less than a week at the most. Yet Jesus Himself claimed that He was coming soon in the last chapter of the Bible. Revelation 22:7 – "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." Revelation 22:12 – Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me to repay each one for what he has done." Revelation 22:20 – "He who testifies to these things says, "Surely, I am coming soon." But it's been 2000 years. Therefore, Jesus' understanding of soon must be different than ours.

One of the best explanations I've heard to resolve this is called "prophetic foreshortening." Basically, this perspective sees future events but does not see the intervening time before those events occur. The prophets focused on the certainty of future events revealed by God. Then they instructed the people to live in light of those coming future events regardless of how close or far away they might be. So **SOON = CERTAIN** in Biblical language. When I see Jesus

say “at the very gates,” I see another Soon. It is certain that He is coming. We just don’t know when nor did the disciples. Yet this taught them to live in a way that was ready for His return.

Then comes controversial verse 34. “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” If Jesus is talking about His return, how could this generation that sits in front of him not pass away until it all happened? The disciples have all passed away. Jesus has not returned. So we either have to come up with a different definition for “this generation” or we have to clarify “these things.” I think it’s most consistent to interpret “these things” as the things that would happen prior to the destruction of the temple. The entire generation of disciples had not yet passed away by 70. We believe John lived into his 90’s and likely wrote Revelation in the 90’s. Others also survived beyond the temple’s destruction. There are other possible explanations you can look up if you’re interested but we must keep moving.

Verse 35 contains a wonderful promise. “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away.” Jesus reassures them that He’s telling them the truth. In fact, His word is so certain that it will even outlast the current construction of heaven and earth. Though everything else of the present world will pass away, Jesus’ words will not fail. Therefore, they need to be taken seriously.

This leads to the second piece our statement. Jesus return will be soon. **But His return will be unexpected.** Jesus makes this clear with his statement “no one knows the day and hour, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son but the Father only.” This is the clearest statement by Jesus of limitation on His divine knowledge during His time on earth. The date of His return was unknown to Him and unknown to God’s heavenly servants called angels. This warns us mere mortals of presuming that we can predict the day. Remember the book 88 reasons why Christ will return in 1988.

But why does Jesus tell them this? I think to remind them that Jesus’ return will be according to the Father’s will. It will not be according to their own will. It is not under their control. So it’s more important to live in expectation than to have the knowledge of the date. That’s what Jesus will go on to emphasize in the verses ahead. But before he gets there, He illustrates what life will be like on the day of His return.

People will be going about ordinary activities on that day. They will eat, drink, marry and be given in marriage just as the people during Noah’s time. They went about their daily routines up to and including the day he entered the

ark. They showed no understanding or concern for the possibility of a sudden flood. Then it came and swept them all away.

Jesus further illustrates this by describing more normal activities. Two men will be in a field or in today's terms at work. One will be taken. Another will remain. Two women will be grinding flour perhaps at the community grinding stone or today two will be out shopping for groceries on that day. One will be taken and another will remain. That means that even believers will be going about their normal activities on that day. His coming will be so unexpected. It would be like a thief coming in the night to steal from our home. Thieves do not give homeowners notice that they will come and rob at 2 AM on Saturday evening. But if we knew that several houses in on our street had been robbed overnight, we might stay up the whole next night watching or preparing for the coming of the thief.

Through these illustrations Jesus instructs the disciples how to live in light of His soon yet unexpected return. Verse 42. Stay awake. Verse 44. Be ready. **Therefore we must live awake and ready for Jesus' unexpected return.**

So what does it look like to stay awake and be ready? Never sleep – take turns staying awake? Does this mean we should stockpile non-perishable foods? Should we install a wood stove and build up a 7 story woodpile in our backyards? Maybe we should also build up our ammunition reserves or better yet move to the mountains?

But that's not the image Jesus' portrays of one ready for His return. He tells another little parable in verses 45-51 about a faithful and wise servant compared to a wicked servant. A master sets one of his servants over his house. He entrusts the servant to give food to the other servants at the proper time. It is the image of a responsible servant who faithfully carries out his or her duty until the master returns. Such a servant will receive the reward of gaining greater responsibility over the master's possessions.

But then Jesus talks about the possibility of the servant going the other way. The wicked servant says to themselves "My master is delayed." There's no indication in the parable of an expected time frame. The wicked servant concludes on their own that their master is delayed. Therefore, they decide to take advantage of the delay. They begin to beat their fellow servants and eat and drink with drunkards. It is the picture of someone who neglects their responsibility and abuses the position of privilege they have received. They elevate themselves above their fellow servants. They abuse them instead of providing food for them at the proper time. Instead of watchful care over the master's estate, they squander time and perhaps resources with drunkards.

Then the parable ends tragically. The master returns on a day the servant does not expect and an hour that he does not know. This goes directly back to Jesus' statement in verse 36. No one knows the day or hour. The master does not forgive the servant. Instead, Jesus uses a terrible picture of the servant being cut to pieces like military victors would treat the defeated. The servant would be sentenced to a place where there will be ongoing weeping and regret.

This is clearly end of the age and judgment day language. For the first time in this teaching, Jesus introduces the theme of judgment accompanying his return. We saw a hint of it last week in verse 30 when the tribes of the earth mourn at his coming. But now he makes judgement explicit. Jesus' return will not only be His glorious victory. It will be a time to give account.

I know that Judgment Day is a very unpopular doctrine and even offensive to people today - even among Christians. People raise questions like "Will there even be a judgment? Why would a loving God judge and punish anyone? Even if He did judge, this business of Hell being a place of everlasting torment can't be true of a good God."

Have you ever heard those kinds of question or even thought about them yourself or maybe even agree with them? We see increasing acceptance of two responses to these questions in Christian communities. One is something called "annihilationism." Basically this position argues that God will judge and there will be a place called Hell where people go for a little while. But it won't be permanent. Eventually, God will annihilate Hell and all those who live there. They will simply cease to exist.

The other position is Universalism. This position states there will be no judgment. Or if there is, in the end God will forgive everyone and we all go to heaven or a better place. I can understand why people like these positions. They seem to make God a little more acceptable to us. They seem to protect Him from looking bad.

But we have to recognize some realities in facing this. First, accepting annihilationism or universalism is a departure from the Historic Christian Faith. The church has understood Jesus and the Bible's teachings for nearly 2000 years to teach a Judgment Day where Christ gives a verdict on where people spend eternity. Those who adopt universalism have long been seen as stepping out of orthodoxy. Those who adopt annihilation are still seen as Christians but with a deeply flawed understanding of God's holiness, the nature and depth of sin and the mercy of God. So both of these positions depart from historic Christian teaching.

People might then say “that’s fine with me because a lot of historic Christianity and its teaching need correction and updating.” Well, to answer that do these two so-called solutions really help? I think universalism is the easier one to deal with. Universalism says everyone goes to heaven. So are we okay with sharing heaven with Adolf Hitler – or all the other despots, thugs, bullies, abusers, hypocrites and murderers who never repented and never paid for their crimes? Inside of all of us is a deep desire for justice. It will only be fully and completely found in God.

Annihilationism might seem a little more reasonable. I understand people who adopt this position as those who seriously contemplate the horror of an eternal conscious punishment from God. To us that might seem unfair. But we don’t know the deep things of God. I don’t think we understand the depths of depravity and the heights of God’s holiness. I don’t think we maybe fully grasp the depth of suffering Christ endured on the cross to bear God’s holy wrath. And I believe the annihilationist position has to go against the consistent teaching of Scripture. We will see this in the weeks to come especially in Matthew 25. Jesus reveals these realities for the benefit of His listeners. If we think it unfair that there is a hell even though Jesus reveals it to us, how much more would we scream on Judgment Day if He didn’t reveal this to us. I don’t like this doctrine. I shudders at its implication which is part of the point isn’t it?

If the alternatives are live the difficult Christian life and you will receive reward after you die and when Christ returns OR live however you want and then just cease existing, most people would choose the second wouldn’t they? And most of us would avoid showing concern and spending time in prayer for our lost loved ones if we knew that they’d just cease to exist upon their death. But if this is a reality, then we must deal with it and its implications.

I think that part of our attraction to these alternatives reveals that we have a misshapen understanding of God and ourselves. We treat God as our peer; our equal. We think we can judge Him although we don’t like Him judging us. We think we know better than Him. We think that He has to prove Himself to us and give us good reason to follow Him. In fact, Scripture and this parable reveals to us that He is our Master and we are His servants. The master has the right to treat His servants with justice. Those who are faithful He will reward. Those who are not, He will punish. So we dare not say to ourselves like the wicked servant – My master is delayed.”

So what does it look like to be wise and faithful servant in everyday life? I think this parable teaches us to be good managers or faithful servants with the tasks or roles assigned to us. Faithfully carrying out ordinary responsibilities like parenting, studying, working, developing and using gifts for God’s glory, having a heart for others and caring for them;

appreciating opportunities and using them to the full; sharing Christ – is living in a constant state of readiness for Jesus' return. The faithful servant looked after His responsibilities and gave food to others at the proper time.

It's not easy. Faithful stewardship requires perseverance and consistency, for the end could come at any time. It requires us to turn to Christ every day for His power and strength to fulfill our calling in a way that glorifies God. Those who postpone their responsibilities and do evil in the meantime may sadly discover that it is too late for them to make amends for their errors. There will be a judgment. It is certain that Jesus will return on a very unexpected day. Will you be ready? Is He your Savior and your Lord? Live as if Christ will return today. Plan as if He will return 100 years from now. And one day, I believe Jesus will declare you to be the wise and faithful servant.