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May 10, 2026

ALERT: MATTHEW 24:36-51

Introductory Activity 1

Begin the group time with a Discussion: Does anyone have a favorite end-of-the-world kind of movie or TV show?

Explain: According to the IMDB website, the top five “End of the World” movies are *2012*, *The Road*, *War of the Worlds*, *28 Days Later*, and *28 Weeks Later*. In these movies and others like them, the world is destroyed by a cosmic or natural disaster, nuclear war, a virus, or some other “natural” or “man-made” event. The truth of Scripture tells us that the end will not come through any of these means. Instead, it will be a culmination of God’s plan to judge sin and recreate the earth into a New Earth akin to His original plan in Genesis 1.

Introductory Activity 2

Optional Activity: Ask the group to use their phones to search “predictions of Christ’s return.” Ask them to call out some of the historical predictions related to Christ’s return.

Explain: The history of Christianity is littered with people who have unsuccessfully predicted the return of Christ. In his commentary on the book of Matthew, Douglas O’Donnell lists a few.

- A. Hippolytus (lived AD 170-about 235): Jesus would return in AD 500.
- B. Pope Sylvester II: Jesus would return on January 1, 1000.
- C. Pope Innocent III: Jesus would return in 1284. (The number 618 [the year Islam was founded] plus 666 equals 1,284.)
- D. Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons): Jesus would return in or around 1832.
- E. William Miller: Jesus would return between 1843 and 1844.
- F. Charles Taze Russell, founder of what would become the Jehovah’s Witness: Jesus would “rapture” the church in 1910, followed by an “invisible” return of Christ in 1914

The list goes on, and as we move forward into the 20th century the ideas become even more ludicrous. One group predicted that Jesus would return in 1998 and take His followers away on a spaceship. The “psychic” Edgar Cayce predicted that a document revealing the secrets of the lost city of Atlantis could be found between the paws of the Great Sphinx in Egypt. This would trigger the events resulting in the return of Christ in the year 2000. Even in our Evangelical Christian bubbles, we might not “predict” the date of Christ’s return, but we often itch for “insider knowledge” about the event. In today’s lesson, Jesus is going to teach about this event. We will see that while we can’t know much about it, we can know that it will happen and that for some it will be a great day and for others it will not be.

Summarize and Transition: Our lesson continues with Matthew’s account of Holy Week, the week leading up to Christ’s death and resurrection. We are still on Tuesday. Jesus has completed His teachings in the Temple. He and His disciples exited the city. Spurred by the comments and questions of the disciples, Jesus begins teaching about the Day of the Lord and His return. Matthew 24-25 is often called Jesus Olivet Discourse because Matthew 24:3 tells us He taught His disciples privately while sitting on the Mount of Olives. Let’s study this passage and be reminded that “Jesus is coming back.” (ETB LG, 113)

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

1. AN UNKNOWN HOUR (MATT. 24:36-41)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 24:36-41.

Explain: In the previous verses, Jesus has been teaching about events leading up to the Day of the Lord. Here He pivots and tells the disciples that the timing of the event is unknown.

Direct and Ask: Direct the group members to examine verse 36 and call out the only person who knows the time of Christ's return. (God the Father)

Explain: Now, this fact might seem straightforward to those steeped in Christian teachings. However, it is kind of a shocking statement because we believe that God is triune (three Persons in one). That would indicate that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one. Jesus actually says in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." So how is it that Jesus, the Son, does not know the time of His return? The apostle Paul helps us understand this in Philippians chapter 2, where he speaks of Christ.

Have someone read Philippians 2:6-8 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Upon coming to earth, Jesus was both fully God and fully man. As a man, He chose to limit His divine power. For example, He **put aside the power to be omnipresent**. Jesus walked from place to place. **He put aside His omnipotence**. Jesus ate food because He was hungry. He drank water because He was thirsty. He slept because He was tired. **Jesus also put aside His omniscience**. We see Him asking questions during His ministry. We might say that He did this as a teaching tool while fully knowing the answer. That might be so, but this passage in Matthew 24 reveals at least one point of Jesus' lack of knowledge. In line with the teachings of Philippians, Jesus put aside any knowledge related to the timing of His return. This is important for us to know. If Jesus did not know the time, then we cannot know it either. Therefore, we must live with expectancy because it will happen unexpectedly. It will be **A Day of Great Surprise** to the world. To help us understand this, Jesus gives an example.

Reread or have someone reread Matthew 24:37-39. (See Notes Box)

A quick refresher on Noah is required. In Genesis 6, we learn that humanity had become exceedingly wicked. ⁷Then the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I created, off the face of the earth, together with the animals, creatures that crawl, and birds of the sky—for I regret that I made them." ⁸Noah, however, found favor with the Lord." Genesis then describes the process by which God saved Noah and his family from the coming flood. Peter tells us that Noah was "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). While building the ark, Noah preached to the people regarding sin and judgment. Nevertheless, only Noah and 7 members of his family entered the ark. The book of Genesis does not tell us what the people outside the boat were doing, but Jesus does tell us. He says they "were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." In other words, they were just going about

Notes:

Philippians 2:6-8

⁶ who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited.

⁷ Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross

Matthew 24:37-39

³⁷ As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. ³⁸ For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. ³⁹ They didn't know until the flood came and swept them all away. This is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be.

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their life. Noah had said the day was coming, but they did not listen and did not change their lives in any way. While “eating and drinking” may be an allusion to sin, it is always what we do every day: eat and drink. Marrying and giving in marriage alludes to the everyday kind of celebration we participate in. Spurgeon writes, “That which is lawful and right, under other circumstances, becomes a positive evil when it takes the place of preparation for the coming of the Son of man.” (Spurgeon, 354)

While we should not stop going about our lives, we should do so with an air of expectancy. Noah and his sons did not stop eating and drinking. The family probably had special dinners and celebrations along the way. Yet, they lived with expectant purpose as they did the work of preparation.

Discuss: What are some activities and practices we can put in place that will help us live with an expectancy of Christ’s return?

Explain: One of the most important practices we can participate in while expectantly awaiting Christ’s return is modeled on the life of Noah. Peter tells us that while he was doing the work of building the ark, he was preaching to the people. We, too, should consistently tell others about the coming of Christ. Because **The Day will be a Day of Great Separation.**

Reread Matthew 24:40-41 (See Notes Box.)

Here we have people working in relation to one another. The men in the field might be coworkers. They might be a father and son or two brothers. The women grinding grain might be two servants, two friends, or a mother and daughter. This example of Jesus reiterates the sudden, surprising nature of His return. It also reveals the great separation that will take place. The people in this story lived and worked in relation to one another regularly. Yet, one of them knew the truth of the Gospel and the other did not. If we want to put this in modern-day language, we might say they worked at the mill together, or they attended every game of dance competition together, or they met at the same book club or ladies’ night together, or they golfed the same course together, yet one of them knew the Lord, and the other did not. The coming of Christ will cause a great separation from those we are closest to if they do not know the Truth of the gospel. And as Paul would say, “How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him?” (see Romans 10:14).

Summarize Transition: In this passage, Jesus instructs His disciples and us to live with expectancy of His return. This expectancy should cause us to consistently tell others the Truth of the gospel so that His return is not a surprise nor a great separation from those we love.

2. BE ALERT (MATT. 24:42-44)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew **24:42-44.**

Notes:

Matthew 24:40-41

⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.

Romans 10:14

¹⁴ How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher?¹

TEACHER'S NOTE: I DO NOT KNOW WHY THE ETB MATERIAL SEPARATES THESE THREE VERSES FROM THE ONES BEFORE. THESE VERSES SIMPLY ROUND OUT AND REITERATE WHAT JESUS JUST SAID (SEE NAC, 366-367)

Explain: In the previous passage, Jesus focused on the unknown nature of the timing of His return. Here, He reminds the disciples of the certainty of His return. The concluding words of this passage include, “the Son of Man *is* coming.” (emphasis added) He *is* coming back. Since that is the case, Jesus’ disciples need to be alert. “Be alert does not refer to expecting something to occur immediately, but rather to being ready in case something does happen. It is the picture of a night watchman who is awake, alert, and at his post.” (ETBC, 106) We have all probably seen a movie where a soldier on the city wall or the soldier keeping watch over a nighttime battlefield falls asleep. In these movies, either someone wakes him with a stern scolding or the enemies take advantage of the moment and attack. Jesus says, “Do not fall asleep, even though it looks like nothing is happening.” Be alert.

Reread verse 43. (See Notes Box.)

Ask: What would you do if you knew that, at some unknown time tonight, a thief would come to your home, sneak in, and steal from you? (You can’t call the police. It is up to you to deal with the situation.)

Explain: We might set up in the woods and wait for him to approach. We might sit by the front door and keep a watch on the driveway. We might set up a bunch of traps like the kid in Home Alone. The one thing you are not going to do is brush your teeth and go to bed with your earplugs in. If you know he is coming but do not know the exact time, you will stay alert. That is the posture Jesus encourages His followers to have related to His return.

Consider: We should stop here and consider *why* a follower of Jesus needs to be alert. Why do we need to be watchful? There might be a couple of reasons. We will talk about one in the next passage, but I think we can consider one important reason at this point. We should be watchful and expectant of Jesus return *so that* we will be found holy and righteous upon His arrival. At the age of 19, Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century pastor, wrote a series of resolutions to help guide his life. For the young Edwards, this meant that he observed his life and determined that there were some ways in which he struggled. He kept the resolutions before himself to check his sinful nature. Two of those resolutions might apply to this passage. They are numbers 7 and 19. Number 7 reads, “Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.” Number 19 reads, “Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour before I should hear the last trump.” If you think God might look at you side-eyed as Christ returns because you were involved in something unbecoming to a Christian, you might simply avoid doing it. Be Alert!

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Matthew 24:43
But know this: If the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into.

Summarize and Transition: This passage reiterates the unexpected nature of Christ's return. Not only should we ensure that others will be ready for it and avoid separation, but we should live holy lives in light of the return so that we will not be caught unawares and unfaithful. In the next passage, Jesus is going to continue in this vein and help us see that we should also be active as we expectantly await His return.

3. BE FAITHFUL (MATT. 24:45-51)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew **24:45-51**.

Explain: Here, Jesus tells a short parable to help His disciples understand what they and other followers should be doing while they wait for His return. Let's look at what the parable tells us and then see what it teaches us. Jesus presents two scenarios in the parable. In both, there is a master and a servant.

The Master: The master appears to be leaving for an extended trip. He does not provide a return date because he does not know it. He can't leave the household unattended, so he places a servant in charge.

The Faithful and Wise Servant: In the first scenario, the master places a servant in charge who proves to be faithful and wise. He is placed in charge of the entire household. It is his job to take care of those in the house. Upon the master's return, he is rewarded because he performed his duties faithfully.

The Wicked Servant: In this scenario, the master places a servant whom he thought was wise and capable in charge. Like the first scenario, he was given complete authority in the household so that he could care for those in the master's house. However, he began to have an internal conversation with himself—in his heart. He realizes that the master is delayed and will not return for some time. Therefore, he begins to act wickedly. He abuses those he is supposed to care for. He also begins to behave sinfully. He doesn't know it, but the master will return unannounced. When the master arrives, he will judge the wicked servant harshly.

That is what the parable tells us. What does it teach us?

Explain: First, we should note that parables are stories to help us understand an idea or concept. They do not reflect completely the reality completely on the ground. Second, we can glean some great truths from parables if we listen closely to Jesus' words.

The Master: In this parable, the master represents Jesus. He is going away for an indeterminate amount of time. Therefore, He determines to leave people behind to care for the household.

The Household: The household seems to represent the body of Christ, the church.

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The Servants: The servants represent God's people. Spurgeon argues that they represent the leaders or pastors of the church. That is true to some extent because the servants represent everyone in the church. Believers have been tasked with caring for others in the body.

Discuss: What are some of the many ways believers care for other believers physically and spiritually?

Explain: Of course, we care for each other physically. We do so when a fellow believer is in need or facing difficult times. We also care for each other by spending time with one another and listening when others need to talk. We also care for each other spiritually. We do so by praying for and with one another. We also do so by sharing godly wisdom about a situation or a decision that needs to be made. We also do so through service in the local church. We serve on teams to get things done. We serve as teachers of children, students, and adults. We serve on special projects like the Easter or Fall outreach events. We serve in unseen ways by cleaning or taking care of a work project at the church. We have all been gifted by the Spirit in a specific way that makes us useful to the church and its people. This parable reminds us to remain faithful and utilize those gifts for the good of the church and fellow believers.

The servants in the passage represent believers who either faithfully serve the body as a representative of Christ or do not. The wicked servant may represent someone in the church who is not actually a follower of Jesus. If that is the case, then we are reminded to be very aware of who serves and leads in the church. Moreover, we should strive to be faithful servants doing the work of ministry consistently and righteously as we expectantly await the return of Christ.

Summarize and Transition: This passage concludes our look at Jesus' remarks about His return. We are reminded in this final section to remain faithful to the master while He is away and care for His church through the works of ministry.

CONCLUDE

Jesus tells His disciples that He will return. He explains that His return will be unexpected, so we should be watchful. Like Noah, we should warn those who will be caught unaware. We should also be alert and guard our own behavior while we wait. Lastly, we should be about the work of the Master while He is away.

As you go out this week, keep the return of Christ in your mind.

How can you help others find Christ?

How can you guard your behavior as you expectantly wait for Christ?

How can you serve the local body and be about the work of the Master while He is away?

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