

Tribulation for the Unprepared at the End

Matthew 24:36-51

Halifax: 17 December 2006

Introduction

Supper was just about over.

- The family was enjoying the delicious cookies that mother had baked that day.
 - “Can I please have one more cookie, Mom?” Junior begged.
 - “No Junior, you have had enough. Come upstairs with me and I will brush your teeth. Then I want you to come back down and clear off the table. Then I will come to wash the dishes.”

After Junior’s teeth were brushed, he headed back to the kitchen to clear off the table.

- But as he did, he kept thinking about those delicious sugar cookies.
 - Perhaps he could have just one more.
 - His mother was taking a long time to come to wash the dishes.
 - Maybe he could just have *one* cookie before she returned...
 - He did. It was very good.
 - She was still not back and there was no sign of her.
 - Maybe he could have just one more.
 - Junior climbs up on the stool and gently removes the lid.
 - He carefully reaches in and lifts out a cookie,
 - and suddenly he hears his mother’s voice!
 - “Junior,” she exclaims reproachfully!
 - Junior looks up with terror to see his mother glaring at him.
 - “Come with me” she demands.
 - It is too late. Nothing can be done. Junior was caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Junior will be lovingly corrected by his mother and hopefully he will learn a lesson.

- But his story illustrates for us a danger that is far more perilous...
 - The danger that any of you would be among those who are caught with their hand in the cookie jar when the Lord Jesus returns to judge the earth!
 - That is, that you would be found unprepared to meet Him when He appears to judge the earth.

- There are three things I want to emphasise from our Lord's instruction in Matthew 24:36-51:
 1. First, that the LORD is coming back and we don't know when.
 2. Secondly, that when He does, it will be too late to prepare yourself for Him.
 3. Thirdly, that you are admonished to prepare for His coming now.
 - You don't want to be caught with your hand in the cookie jar.

TRANS> Let's look at each of these points in order.

I. The LORD is coming back and we don't know when.

- Jesus shows us that the event is quite certain, but the time is not for us to know.

A. We have seen in Matthew 24 that Jesus' disciples were quite desirous for the end of the age to come...

1. They yearned to sit on twelve thrones Jesus had told them they would sit on, judging the twelve tribes of Israel—
 - to have the whole world in subjection to them!
 - They were ready for Him to bring the kingdom of glory at once.
 - And so it was that when Jesus had told them that the temple would be utterly destroyed (as recorded back in verse 2),
 - they had automatically assumed that this would happen at the time of His return at the end of the world!
 - In Matthew 24:3, they ask Him:
 - “When will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?”
 - You can see that they expect the destruction of the temple to occur at the same time as His personal return...
 - The word they use in verse 3 that is translated “**your coming**” is “*parousia*” which refers to a special kind of coming...
 - It is only used four times in the gospels—all four occurrences are in Matthew 24...
 - It speaks of the personal, bodily return of our Lord Jesus at the end of the age.

TRANS> The disciples had hoped that this would occur very soon.

2. But Jesus tells them that although the destruction of Jerusalem will take place within the present generation,

- His *parousia* will come at whatever time the Father has appointed.
- a. He warns them repeatedly against supposing that the events of this world are a sign that the end has come.
 - He tells them over and over that there will be no sign of his *parousia*.
 - Wars and rumours of wars are not a sign of it...
 - Famines and earthquakes are not a sign of it...
 - The coming and going of false prophets and false Christs are not a sign of it...
 - The *parousia* will come without any such warnings.
- b. The destruction of Jerusalem, however, is quite a different matter!
 - There will be a clear sign of that—
 - As soon as they see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet (v. 15) they are to flee.
 - The abomination of desolation refers to foreign armies that would surround the holy city to destroy it...
 - Daniel had spoken of two such events in his prophecies...
 - One of them had already been experienced by the Jews in 168 BC when the Greeks had defiled the Temple for several years.
 - The other would occur yet future to Jesus' disciples—when the Romans came to make the temple desolate in 70 AD.
 - Instead of, “When you see the abomination of desolation,” he has Jesus words to be, “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.” This is how Jesus explained it.
 - c. So this sign of Jerusalem's destruction would be so clear that Jesus is able to give his disciples instructions to flee before it strikes...
 - They would be able to know ahead of time.
 - As soon as they saw the city surrounded, He tells them to flee to the mountains.
 - And we learn from history that this is exactly what everyone who believed Jesus did so that they escaped the terrible judgement that fell upon Jerusalem in 70 AD.
 - Others did not know where the coming of the Romans would lead, but those who believed Jesus were able to escape.

TRANS> So the destruction of Jerusalem would come with signs to warn...

- B. But you can see that the *parousia* would come with no warning signs!
1. All we are told as far as the timing of it is that it will not occur until two things happen:
 - a. In verse 14, Jesus says that it will not occur until the gospel of the kingdom is preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations...
 - b. And in verse 34 and 35, He says that it will not occur until the all the things He has spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem have taken place...
 - again, that destruction of Jerusalem being an event that would definitely occur in the present generation...
 - v. 34-35: “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.”
 - c. Neither one of these antecedents to the *parousia* gives us much to go on as far as determining the time of the *parousia*...
 - The Apostle Paul could say in his day that the gospel had been preached in all the world...so we don't have to wait for that...
 - And the destruction of Jerusalem occurred almost 2000 years ago... so that has definitely been accomplished...
 - This means that Jesus could conceivably come back at any time.
 - Jesus does not deny that there will be an end...
 - Heaven and earth will pass away.
 - He speaks very certainly of His return, his physical coming, his *parousia*...
 2. But he speaks just as certainly that the time of it will come as a complete surprise to us.
 - a. In verse 36, He says,
 - v. 36: “But of that day”—
 - What day?
 - Not the destruction of Jerusalem that will take place in that generation... but “**that day**,” that *other* day...
 - That day that heaven and earth will pass away!
 - That day of His *parousia* that the disciples had inquired about...
 - **That day!**

- And so He says (in verse 36):
 - v. 36: “But of **that day and hour** no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.”
 - In Mark (and in some manuscripts of Matthew), he even adds that even He Himself, the Son of Man, does not know the day or the hour of His return!
 - The angels do not know, and even He in His human nature does not know.

- b. Now it is altogether astonishing to see how many there are in the history of the church who have tried to predict His return!
 - We are told of persons even in the time of Paul’s epistles who declared that the *parousia* had already come...
 - There were those at 1000 AD who gathered to greet him...supposing that to be the end of the Millennial Kingdom.
 - On October 22, 1844, the followers of William Miller gathered in a similar way—then again in 1845 supposing Miller was off a year...
 - In our day, there are those such as Jack Van Impe or Harold Camping who continue to set dates as if they knew.

- c. It is too bad that the Church has not listened to Origen, one of the early church fathers, who said of this verse:
 - “These words seem to convict those who profess that they have knowledge of the end and the destruction of the world, and make announcements as though the Day of the Lord were at hand.”
 - Calvin pointed out that it was a proof of excessive pride and wicked covetousness to desire that we who creep on earth should know more than is permitted to the angels in heaven!
 - Let me advise you that if you ever run into someone claiming to know the time of our Lord’s coming,
 - do not listen to that person!

- 3. Jesus makes it clear that it is not only a time that was unknown in His day, but a time that will **remain** unknown to the inhabitants of the earth until it occurs!
 - a. In verse 37-39, He says that the circumstances surrounding His coming (the *paousia* of the Son of Man as He calls it) will be like those in the time of Noah...
 - and He tells us specifically *how* they will be like those times...
 - specifically that life will be going on as usual...

- They will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day arrives.
 - Just doing the things that we human beings do to survive.
 - There will be no special signs or warnings of any kind, nothing unusual...
 - Jesus will come when business is going on as usual.
- b. Now we know that Noah's day was also a very wicked day, but that is not Jesus' point of comparison here...
- He deliberately speaks of those circumstances common to man that are not necessarily evil at all to say that people will just be living their lives as usual when He comes.
 - No one will have any indication to alert them in advance that the day has come.
- c. In verses 40 and 41 He shows that believers will not be doing anything differently than unbelievers in that day—as far as the ordinary course of life I mean...
- They will not be going out to meet Him because they know...
 - A believer will be working in the field next to an unbeliever, ploughing or harvesting, or whatever...
 - and the believer will be taken (received) to the Lord...
 - the unbeliever will be left.
 - Two women will be grinding grain, helping each other turn the mill stone as they often did...
 - One will be taken to be with the LORD at His return, the other will be left to be judged.
 - The believer will have no more knowledge of the event than the unbeliever.
 - His coming, **as to its timing**, will be a surprise to both!

TRANS> Of course I do not mean that it will be surprise to the believer that He comes—

- the believer expects him to come for sure, but had no idea *when* it will be.
- And so you see first of all that the LORD is coming back, but we don't know when.
- But now I want you to see secondly that...

II. When he does come, it will be too late to prepare yourself for Him, your destiny will be sealed.

- **Whatever you are on that day, you are.**

- A. As with Noah, when the day comes, you will either be ready for it or you won't.
1. Noah had spent a good part of his life preparing the ark for the day of judgement...
 - He was prepared for God's judgement with the preparation that God had commanded...
 - It was too late for those who had not prepared an ark on the day the flood came.
 - So it was in Egypt on the night of the Passover—
 - you were either prepared, having applied the blood on your door posts, or you were not prepared when the death angel came round.
 - Jesus is warning you not be deceived and suppose that you can prepare when you see some sign of His return...
 - As soon as you realise that it has come, it will be too late to prepare.
 2. There will be an immediate, complete, and permanent separation between the prepared and the unprepared in that day, just as there was in Noah's day.
 - a. Again, I point you to verse 40 and 41—
 - two men working in the field, suddenly separated into two totally different destinies!
 - two women, working at the millstone, suddenly separated into two totally different destinies!
 - b. The language is very interesting here...
 - verse 39 speaks of the unprepared being *taken away* (αἰρῶ is the word used here) by the flood...
 - verse 40 and 41 speak of the prepared being *taken* (the word is παραλαμβάνω which means *received* or *taken with another*)
 - and so in this case seems to refer not to those taken away by judgement, but to those received, caught up, as Paul says in Thessalonians, to be with the LORD...
 - I might mention here that Paul uses a very specific word in Thessalonians that speaks of going out to meet an important person in order that you may escort Him into town...
 - It was the kind of thing that was done when an embassy went out to welcome a king coming to their town.
 - In this case, we will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord of Glory when He comes to judge the earth.

- We, who believe, will be given the privilege to join that great embassy of resurrected saints and of holy angels to escort our Lord to earth!
- B. Our LORD shows us how very different the destinies of those two men in the field will be, and how different the circumstances of that woman that is taken and that woman who is left at the millstone!
1. Those who seem to be very much the same in this world—
 - both doing the same thing and even doing it side by side,
 - will suddenly be separated into two radically different conditions when the Lord returns.
 - Who can comprehend the misery of the one and the joy of the other?
 2. See how our Lord describes the difference!
 - a. He illustrates this difference in verse 45-51,
 - with a master who returns from a journey, having left his faithful servant in charge.
 - Altogether different will be his response to that servant at his return if that servant is found doing his will, or if that servant is found beating his fellows servants and eating and drinking with the drunkards!
 - b. Of the one found doing his master's will, the Lord says (in verses 46-47):
 - v. 46-47: Blessed *is* that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.
 - 1) What an marvellous thing for the Lord to say that you are blessed in that day!
 - To be pronounced blessed by Him is to be one who brings cheer and gladness to Him, to be congratulated by Him and to be approved.
 - 2) If you are pronounced blessed when He returns, so you will be!
 - You will be given His eternal inheritance—made ruler over all His goods!
 - Nothing that can make for true and lasting happiness will be withheld from you.
 - You will brought into the eternal fellowship of God household to live in the delight of the love exchanged between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!
 - You yourself will be brought into the circle of that love, and according to your capacity as a creature,

- you will be given a happiness that defies comparison with any happiness you may have known in this world!
- c. But alas, if you are found unprepared for His coming—
- If you are found to be living your life without reference to the Lord,
 - doing your own will,
 - living as if He has no particular authority over you and no right to command you...
 - Jesus says
 - v. 50: “the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him* and at an hour that he is not aware of,”
 - He will catch him mistreating those under His care!
 - He will catch him in his distracted consumption with this world!
 - He will catch him with his hand in the cookie jar!
 - v. 51 "and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
 - The weeping and gnashing of teeth speaks of an ongoing anguish and misery that will befall him.
 - Jesus says that he will have his portion with hypocrites...
 - Why with hypocrites (or play actors)?
 - No doubt because he pretended that this world does not belong to the Lord...
 - He tried to pretend that He did not have to answer to the Lord... that he would never have to give an account of himself.
 - His whole life was a sham, a play act...
 - a pretence that this world is not really a world that God made...
 - that what is clear is not really clear but confusing and uncertain and cannot be known...
 - If you have disregarded the LORD,
 - this misery will be your misery and it will come upon you quite suddenly if you happen to be here when the Lord returns...
 - and even if you don't happen to be here,
 - it will still come upon you on that day when you are snatched forth from the grace to stand before Him.
 - You can pretend, but you cannot escape.

TRANS> Once our Lord returns, it will be too late to make any changes.

- Your destiny will be sealed forever!
- And so...

III. Our Lord admonishes you to prepare yourself for His coming now!

A. See how He urges you to watch

- v. 42 “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.”
- 1. The idea here is that you would be always looking for Him...watching for Him... the way a man at a military look out post watches for the enemy.
 - You are to live every moment of your life under the expectation that He may come in that moment.
 - In other words, don't be caught with your hand in the cookie jar!
- 2. Now of course, the point is not that everything depends on that particular moment—
 - that if you happened to be caught in a temptation at the moment of His return, all would be lost...
 - What matters is that you are living your life as one who expects to meet Him at any time and to give an account to Him...
 - That rather than conducting your affairs as if the great day will never come, that you are constantly expecting it and preparing for it...
 - that your whole life is shaped by the reality of His coming so that when you do fall into sin,
 - you repent and ask forgiveness.
- 3. He uses the illustration of one who knows that a robber is coming.
 - If he knows that a robber is going to come, he is going to keep a look out for him.
 - You are going to live in a state of preparedness.
 - If a restaurant owner knows that the health inspector could come at any time and shut down his business if he is out of compliance,
 - he will see to it that he is always ready for him... always on the look out.
 - That is what Jesus is telling you to do because you don't know when He will come.

B. And notice how He personalises this with His disciples...

1. In verse 44, he says,
 - “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”
 - a. Jesus’ disciples often thought certain things did not apply to them...
 - But Jesus insists,
 - “**You also** be ready...”
 - He is saying,
 - “It applies to you too.”
 - b. Then He gives the illustration of the master that went away on a journey and left his servant to run things while he was gone...
 - We already looked at this illustration to see what the outcome would be,
 - but I want you to notice now how it is especially tailored to Jesus’ disciples.
 - They were soon to be specifically entrusted with His word and the affairs of the church after Jesus returned to heaven.
 - They would be made rulers over his household to give to all their food in due season—that is, to minister the word of God.
 - He is warning them that in His long absence,
 - they must not take matters into their own hands and begin to do things their own way as if it were their house instead of His house!
 - They are to remember that **He** is the Master and that one day He will return...
 - They are to be always ready for that return...
 - They are to be sure that they will be found doing things **His** way when He comes and will not have drifted into doing things their own way.
 - c. You see, that is the great danger—that they would say in their hearts,
 - v. 48 “My master is delaying his coming” and then begin to beat their fellow servants and to eat and drink with the drunkards...
 - that the master should return and not find them giving everyone in the household their food in due season...
 - in their case, administering the word that He had appointed them to minister to his people.
 - Jesus says, you—you who have been given this special responsibility—you also—you in particular, be ready because you don’t know when I am coming.

2. But now I say that if you are wise, you will apply these things to yourself personally also!
 - a. You need to say, “I also, I in particular need to be ready for His coming...”
 - 1) I am a father and a husband.
 - God forbid that he should come and find me neglecting to provide for the physical needs of my family—worse than an infidel!
 - God forbid that he should come and find me neglecting my calling to bring God’s word to my household—
 - to discipline my children, to see that my family is faithful in worship...
 - 2) or another should say, “I also, I in particular should be ready.”
 - I am an elder and how terrible it would be if He should return and find me doing my own will instead of caring for His people.
 - God forbid that I should be trusting in my position rather than serving my Lord in my position...
 - that the blood of His saints should be on my hands.
 - That I should be found taking disciples to myself instead of to my Lord.
 - 3) or another should say, “I also, I in particular should be ready,”
 - I am only a child and have not had time to prepare as others have...
 - God forbid that He should come and find me unconcerned and indifferent about my soul when I am called to seek Him in the days of my youth.
 - God forbid that He should find me unprepared because I thought I could put it off until later!
 - 4) And another should say, “I in particular should be ready,”
 - for I have been a believer for a long time.
 - by now I should have made a lot more progress.
 - I have not prepared myself the way I should.
 - I need to be all the more diligent. I must not put it off any longer, for my Lord could come at any time.

TRANS> You get the idea.

- Just as Jesus applied all this to His disciples in particular, you need to apply to yourself in particular.

- It is God's message to **you** today to prepare **today!**
- b. The danger is that you too will say in your heart, "my Lord delays His coming."
- He won't come for a long time...
 - Let me tell you what happens when you say that...
 - There is a kind of downward progression that results...
- 1) You do something that you know your Lord would not be pleased with, but there seem to be no consequences...
- Perhaps you neglect Bible reading or regular worship at the stated worship times established by the elders,
 - or maybe you are a little slack about providing for your family...
 - But nothing adverse seems to happen...
 - You are not called to account for your actions.
 - Or perhaps you have found yourself using harsh or unkind language, giving a covetous glance at someone's wife or someone's bank account, surfing the net when you are supposed to be working, engaging in a little gossip...
 - you get the idea...
 - you are neglecting something or you are doing something that is not quite right...
 - and nothing adverse seems to come of it.
 - Nobody seems to notice...
 - DIGRESSION: And let me just mention on the side here that this is one of the reasons we need to encourage each other—we have to wake each other up when our consciences go to sleep—that is why parents are to discipline children and elders are to discipline the members of the church— and why civil magistrates are supposed to punish sin—we are to show people that there are consequences for sin because they forget...

TRANS> But now, back to the point—

you have done these little things and you are not called to account...

- 2) So then you begin to grow comfortable in what you are doing.
- In effect you are saying,

- “I haven’t had to give an account for my slackness—perhaps it’s okay—perhaps I won’t have to give an account.”
 - “My Lord delays His coming.”
 - “I can go on with this and it won’t really matter.”
 - Very soon you are very comfortable with your sin—only a little sin!
 - and once you are comfortable with those little sins, you take on a few new ones that trouble even what is now your partially hardened conscience.
 - Before you know it, you are beating your fellow servants and eating and drinking with the drunkards...
 - and assuming that you will never have to answer for it!
- c. This is exactly what your LORD is warning you about in this passage.
- 1) You see, He **is** coming and you **will** have to give an account to Him.
 - This is not your world, it is His world and He is the Lord of it!
 - If you are not living in the reality of that, it may be that you are less ready for Him to come than you think you are!
 - You may think that you have trusted in Jesus for your salvation,
 - but it may be the case that you are not yet born again.
 - 2) You see, if you are born again,
 - you have come to believe and admit that you are subject to God’s judgement and that you will give an account to Him...
 - And you have realised that you are a sinner who is worthy of condemnation...
 - And you have understood that the only remedy is found in Jesus Christ who came to die for your sins...
 - And so you have fled to Him for salvation to prepare you for the coming judgement.
 - 3) Let me tell you,
 - If you are someone who has done that,
 - you will not be able to live as if there is not coming judgement!
 - You did not really ever come to Jesus unless you were gripped by the reality of God’s judgement!
 - And if you have been gripped by the reality of His coming judgement,

- It will not be possible for you to be dismissive about it!
- It will be real to you!
- You will not live as those live who do not expect to give and account to the LORD!

C. You will rather live as one who is eagerly expecting your Lord to come!

1. You will conduct your affairs as one who wants to please Him in heart and behaviour, in living a life of love to Him and for Him.

- You will be like a bride preparing herself to meet her husband!
 - Not indifferent of what He thinks of you, but ever and always living to please Him.

2. Brothers and sisters, don't you see!

a. We **are** going to meet Him!

- He **is** coming for us!
- He **is** working in us now to prepare us for that day!

b. Won't it be wonderful to be called forth to escort Him when He comes in His glory—

- to know that at last the hour has come when we will be brought into His house to live with Him forever?
 - Do you believe that this is **really** going to happen?
 - Surely then, your chief concern is about preparing yourself to meet Him!
 - Surely your whole life is about nothing else but getting yourself ready for that great day!
 - Does anything else really matter?

c. Surely, if this is your hope, you can say with Paul:

- 2 Corinthians 5:9-11: "Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men."