

SURPRISE!
MATTHEW 24:36-51

At a wildlife center in Zimbabwe, some British tourists were photographing animals that were behind a fence in front of them. You can tell by their faces and the way they were aiming their cameras that these women thought they were capturing priceless images of African wildlife. But they had no idea that the real “Kodak moment” was happening directly behind them. For while they were intently trying to get just the right pose and angle of a zebra or a baboon or a golden crested crane, a bull elephant had snuck up behind them. Imagine their surprise when they turned around and discovered the largest land animal on earth standing just a few inches from where they sat.

How do you react to surprises? I suppose it all depends, doesn't it? It depends on how you *interpret* the surprise, and how the surprise *affects* you. It is possible that one or two of these ladies might have been delighted by what they imagined was an adorable mammal tiptoeing up behind them because he wanted to play. But it is likely that some of them were scared to death by what they imagined was an enormous predator who viewed them as lunch.

Like I said, it all depends on how you interpret the surprise, and how it affects you. And the very same surprise can affect people in radically different ways and produce radically different responses and results.

That will be true of *the* most anticipated event of all time that, ironically, will also be the greatest *surprise* of all time—a surprise that will affect everyone living on the earth in profoundly different ways producing profoundly different responses and results. I'm referring to the Second Coming of Jesus.

We've been studying a passage of Scripture commonly referred to as the *Olivet Discourse*. It was triggered by a statement Jesus made as He and His disciples were walking out of the temple and some of them were admiring how grand and glorious it was. Jesus shocked them by telling them that one day it would be reduced to a pile of rubble. That got the disciples to thinking. So, when they got to the Mount of Olives, they asked Jesus three questions. When will this happen, that is, when will the temple be destroyed? What would be the sign of His coming? And when would the end of the age occur?

The disciples' assumed that all three of these events would occur almost immediately, perhaps within days or weeks, *and* that they would also occur one right after another. But in His response Jesus let them know that world history was not going to come to an end any time soon.

He began by citing a number of phenomena that would occur in the future. He said there would be widespread spiritual deception (4-5), political instability and international tension (6-7a), catastrophic natural disasters (7b-8), hostility and hatred directed toward Jesus' followers (9), extensive apostasy and betrayal in the Christian community (10), an abundance of false prophets and duped people (11), and cold-heartedness in most people (12).

When will these things happen? It is most reasonable, I believe, to interpret them happening during the time between Jesus' ascension into heaven and His return from heaven to earth. It is a span of time the Bible calls “the last days,” a span that has now lasted for more than two thousand years.

However, beginning in verse 15, Jesus moves from the general to the specific. He is going to directly answer the disciples' first question, "when will this happen?" meaning, when will the Temple in Jerusalem be demolished?

In verses 15-35 Jesus said that Daniel's prophecy that the temple would be defiled, what Daniel called "the abomination that causes desolation", would be fulfilled. He said that the situation at this time would be so dangerous and so desperate and would occur so suddenly that the residents of Jerusalem would be forced to flee immediately and seek refuge in the mountains. So perilous would the situation be that Jesus said people would not have the few minutes needed to retrieve items from their homes, or even a cloak lying on the edge of a field. He said that pregnant women and nursing mothers would be especially vulnerable at this time, and that it would be particularly challenging if it were to occur in the winter or on a Sabbath.

Jesus was obviously referring to people who lived in the city of Jerusalem, people who observed Jewish customs, and people who were dependent on their own two legs for transportation, rather than on automobiles, taxis, helicopters, and airplanes. Thus, there is every reason to believe that the events that occurred in Jerusalem in A.D. 66-70 are the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in verses 15-22. That is when the Romans invaded Jerusalem, demolished and desecrated the temple, and caused Jews to evacuate the city, leaving it desolate.

This interpretation is supported by Jesus' declaration that this generation would not pass away until all these things had occurred. "This generation," then, is the disciple's generation, the generation that actually heard him say these words.

But of the three questions the disciples asked Jesus, the one they were most interested in was *when* He would come in power and glory and take His place on the throne. They wanted a sign of that coming. But thus far all He has done is tell them when He will *not* come, and He has given them no signs. He is not going to come before the siege in Jerusalem, neither will the destruction of the Temple be a "sign" of His coming.

So, what *will* be the sign of His coming? In the passage we looked at last time (vv. 28-35) Jesus said the sign of His coming will be the appearance of Jesus Himself in heaven (the sky). In other words, the "sign" of Jesus' coming *is* His coming! Jesus wants His disciples to know that there will be *no* advance sign of His coming that would enable them (or us) to predict the exact time. He comes when He comes, and the people who are then alive will know it when it happens.

And Jesus reinforces this with a shocking statement in **verse 36**.³⁶ *"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*" This is Jesus' plain statement that He did not know when the end of the age would come. That may seem surprising, since He was the Son of God, but nonetheless it is clear.

And accepting this point clears up a lot of confusion about chapter 24. It tells us that Jesus was not meaning to prophesy about the specific time of "the end" or of His return, since He Himself did not know when it would be. And this can only mean, therefore, that those who interpret Matthew 24 as Jesus identifying a series of specific events and phenomena that will immediately precede His return are misguided. How could that be since He Himself did not know when He was going to return?

So, we now come to the real lesson in the Olivet Discourse. Jesus' words are not so much to be taken as a prophecy about the future, but as a lesson in Christian living for the here and now. This is Jesus' warning that His disciples always need to be spiritually ready

precisely because they *cannot* know when He will return, and that His return is going to be sudden and unexpected. In other words, it is going to take people by surprise.

Look at what Jesus says in **verses 37-39**. *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.*

It took Noah a hundred years to build the ark. When he began construction there were a lot of people who took notice of what he was doing. Some of them were skeptical from the start, thinking he was out of his mind. But others, no doubt, were curious and inquisitive, and perhaps sincerely wondered if Noah really *had* heard from the Lord.

But a hundred years is a long time, and even friends and sympathizers lose interest after a while. With each passing day Noah's prophecy that God would destroy the earth seemed less credible and more unlikely. Remember, as human beings, we fall victim to the law of diminishing returns. When we are exposed to something for a prolonged period of time, even something that initially amazes and impresses us, we become desensitized. We become less and less interested and impressed over time, so that, eventually, it ceases to have any real significance or make any real impact.

That's what happened in the days of Noah. While day after day and month after month and year after year he was focused on building the ark, everybody else carried on with business as usual. They were eating, drinking, marrying, having kids, planting crops, building businesses, and while they were doing all these things, they could actually see Noah working, making slow and steady progress. But after a while they didn't give him or his prophecy a second thought. Somehow, Noah and his ark became remote, even though they could see them right before their eyes.

Jesus says, this is how it will be when He returns. People will have heard about it, people will be familiar with the prediction, they will witness the slow and steady advancement of the gospel and the kingdom, but for most it will have absolutely no impact on how they live their lives. They will live as though Jesus' imminent return has no relevance to their lives whatsoever. And, therefore, it will take them by surprise.

Look at **verses 40-41**. *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.*

It is perfectly appropriate to take Jesus literally here. When He comes His followers who are on the earth at the time will suddenly disappear. We call it "the rapture". Paul tells us that *"...the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:16-17).* And He said this would happen *"in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye"* (1 Cor. 5:52).

When Jesus returns His followers, both those who are alive and those who have died, will be suddenly evacuated from the earth and will meet Him in the air, leaving those left behind—unbelievers—to wonder and to marvel at their abrupt disappearance. And, make no mistake, it *will* impact them.

One cannot see someone disappear right before their eyes and carry on as though nothing happened. It is going to cause even the most hard-hearted unbeliever to come to grips with the truth that Jesus is real and Jesus is Lord and that they are not on His side.

Which means they are not safe from what lies ahead. They are in danger. They are going to have to face the consequences of their unbelief.

Is that a fair interpretation of how unbelievers will respond to the rapture? If you think that this guy who is left in the field by himself or the woman who is left at the grinding mill by herself are just going to shrug their shoulders and then go back to their work, you're mistaken. We learned last time that when He appears everyone will see Him, causing most to mourn. This event will bring business as usual to a screeching halt, causing widespread panic.

Jesus' coming will be sudden and unexpected, but it will impact everyone. And there are tremendous implications of this as we anticipate that day. Look at **verse 42**. ***42 Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.***

This verse is a summary of the main idea of the entire Olivet Discourse. No one knows when Jesus will return, but since He could return at any time, we must always be ready.

Once again, the disciples had asked for a sign of His coming. But Jesus says that the only "sign" of His coming will be His actual coming. And the problem with that, from our perspective, is that it does not give us time to prepare. And Jesus knows this is a problem for us. We don't *want* to be surprised. We'd like some advance warning so that we can tidy up our lives and get our house in order and our ducks in a row. **Verse 43**. ***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.***

Rarely is there advance warning for a burglary. If there were, burglars would be out of business. The only reason burglars are successful is because they catch their victims by surprise.

The point Jesus is making is that there is not going to be advance warning of His coming. It will come suddenly and unexpectedly, and it could happen at any time. So, if you want to be prepared, don't look for signs, don't try to interpret world events, and, most especially, don't live carelessly as though it couldn't possibly happen today. Be ready all the time. Jesus says in **verse 44**, ***44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.***

Thus far we can identify at least three principles from Jesus' words in verses 36-44 (you can fill in the blanks on the back side of your outline if you are taking notes).

Jesus could return at any time. The theological term for this is "the imminent return of Christ"

Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected and will take many by surprise. There will be no advance warning. It will happen when it happens, and it could be today, it could be tomorrow, or it could be a hundred years from now.

Jesus expects His followers to always be ready. In fact, He goes on to say that readiness or preparedness is evidence of whether someone truly belongs to Him.

Look at **verses 45-47**. ***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.***

Mr. Carson, the affable butler on the PBS television series, *Downton Abbey*, is the epitome of *responsibility* and the embodiment of *duty*. His character oozes with integrity, loyalty, diligence, thoroughness, tirelessness, and precision. He gets up early and stays up late and is attentive to his work all the while. He never complains, never slacks off, never takes shortcuts, never passes the buck, and never quits. And he does all this whether the master of the house is around or not.

In describing someone who is prepared for his coming, Jesus uses the metaphor of a trusted servant who, like Mr. Carson, is in charge of the whole household. But the emphasis in this metaphor is that this servant is faithfully attending to his master's business while his master is away, presumably for a long time.

We all know the proverb, "When the cat's away the mice play." When the master is not around there is a tendency to slack off, be sloppy, be careless, be lazy, and procrastinate. Then, when you get word that the master is coming home you anxiously and feverishly work to get everything ready so that he will not be disappointed and you will not get in trouble.

But the point Jesus is making is that we don't know *when* the master is returning. There will be *no* advance warning. So, if servants slack off, they are taking the risk that the master will return when His household is in disarray.

Jesus says, it will be good for that servant when his master returns to find him performing his duties, attending to his business, and being diligent with the responsibilities that he has been given. *How* will it be good? **Verse 47**, *47 Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.*

Don't miss the significance of Jesus' words. How we live our lives on this earth in relation to Jesus' business—His will, His kingdom, His specific assignment for our lives—has eternal consequences. It determines our reward when we get to heaven. Here's the fourth principle: *Those who are prepared for Jesus' coming will receive His pleasure and reward.*

However, the outcome will be quite different for those who are not prepared for His coming. Jesus continues with the metaphor of a servant who has been put in charge of His master's household while the master is away for a prolonged period of time. Look at **verses 48-51**. *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.*

Of course, Jesus is talking about hell. He is referring to a place of conscious, unending torment where all those who have not put their faith in Him will be assigned when He comes. And there is no relief in this place. There is no escape from this place. There is no hope in this place. People who are assigned to go there will suffer forever.

And *why* will these faithless servants be damned? Because their self-indulgence, their idleness, their inattentiveness to the Lord's will and His work, the fact that they were *not* ready when He returned *proved* that they did not belong to Him.

And this raises the critical question. Are *you* ready for the Lord's return? Are you ready *right now*? If Jesus came today—and He could—where would He assign you? Would it be that place of honor and privilege and blessing in heaven, or would it be that place of torment and suffering in hell?

I hope you're not basing your hope of heaven on the fact that you call yourself a Christian, or that you asked Jesus in your heart way back when, or that you raised your hand or walked down an aisle or signed a card at an evangelistic meeting.

You *may* have become a true follower of Jesus when you did those things, but the proof that you really, truly belong to Him is how you are living today. The proof, according to Jesus, is whether you are performing the duties He has assigned you, attending to His business, and being diligent with your assignment. The proof is whether you are ready for His return. Because the fifth principle in this passage is this: *Those who are unprepared for Jesus' coming will be condemned.*

I asked you earlier, how do you react to surprises? I suggested that it all depends on how you interpret the surprise, and how it affects you. I also said the very same surprise can affect people in profoundly different ways and produce profoundly different responses and results.

Jesus' return will be the greatest surprise of all time—a surprise that will affect everyone living on the earth in profoundly different ways producing profoundly different responses and results.

Make sure this surprise is one that you welcome, one that delights you, one that is to your benefit. And the way to make sure is to be prepared now—not tomorrow, not after you've sowed your wild oats, not after you've completed your bucket list, not after you've fulfilled your dreams. If you postpone this it may be too late. Because no one knows when Jesus will return, but since He could return at any time, we must always be ready.

Surprise?

Matthew 24:36-51

Main Idea No one knows when Jesus will return, but since He could return at any time, we must always be ready.

The time of Christ's return

Who knows? (36)

Not the angels, nor the Son

The Father only

As in the days of Noah (37-41)

Business as usual (37)

Caught by surprise (38-41)

Sudden disappearance

Sudden realization

The way to prepare for Christ's return (42-44)

Keep watch (42-44)

It could happen at any time (42)

Vigilance (or not) has consequences (43)

It will be unexpected (44)

Keep serving (45-51)

The faithful and wise servant (45-47)

The pleasure of Jesus (46)

The blessing of Jesus (47)

The wicked servant (48-51)

Thoughtless and careless (48-49)

Severe judgment (50-51)

Principles:

1. Jesus could return at any time
2. Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected and will take many by surprise
3. Jesus expects His followers to always be ready
4. Those who are prepared for Jesus' coming will receive His pleasure and reward
5. Those who are unprepared for Jesus' coming will be condemned