

- *Have you noticed how many Hollywood productions comment on the subject of the end of the world? Use the internet to explore what is thought about this by people who are not Christians, and compare what you find with this study.*

Final Prayer

We offer to you, Lord Jesus, the day we have lived and all it has contained. Where things have gone well, we thank you for your grace and favour; where things have gone badly, we ask for your forgiveness. In this way we express our faith in You, Lord Jesus Christ, and trust in Your unfailing love. AMEN

Prayer

Lord God, You teach us that true wisdom is to be found amongst the humble (*Prov. 11:2*). Give us, we pray, the true humility of gracious speech, loving actions, genuine concern and a generous heart, and also the wisdom of justice, integrity, honesty and care. May we live according to these qualities of grace, and the infilling of the Holy Spirit who inspires them within us all; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Seasons

Pray today for those whose crops have failed because rain has not come in due season. As our world struggles with climate change, pray for those who suffer due to its effects.

On-going prayers

- *Give thanks for the joys of preparing for a coming feast!*
- *Pray for all who will experience hardship this Christmas time*
- *Pray for those who have lost their jobs because of the recession*

Meditation

In a world full of terrorists and gunmen, dear Lord,
May those who design the weapons of war desist.

In a world where money buys governments and power,
May good people you put in public life protect us.

In a world using energy with no thought for tomorrow
May the worlds polluters accept their responsibilities.

In a world where countries show aggressive religious bias
May God's people demonstrate His love, in Christ.

In a world in which the hunger of the poor condemns our greed,
May the injustices of our world be exposed to view.

In a world which excludes, ignores and rejects its Creator,
May all of us be judged, and may God's Kingdom come.

Bible Study - Matthew 24:37-44

³⁷ *'At the coming of the Son of Man it will be rather like the days of Noah. ³⁸ For as in the days before the flood, people ate and drank, married and prepared for marriage, right up to the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Son of Man will be just like this.*

⁴⁰ *'At that time, two men will be out in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.*

⁴² *'Keep alert therefore, as you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

⁴³ *But understand this: if the owner of the house knew the hour of the night in*

which the thief would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Because of this, you know you must be ready; for you do not know the hour when the Son of Man will come.'

Review

Yesterday, we read Jesus' warnings about His coming again in glory, the Parousia. Whatever your feelings about what Jesus said, there is no doubt that in this passage, Jesus went on to say quite categorically; 'about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son.' (24:35). This is reported by both Matthew and Mark (13:32), and underpins the rest of what is said in the Gospels about the Parousia. Jesus made it very clear that not knowing the time of Parousia is part of God's design, so that we are ready for when it does happen.

Noah and the Flood In verses 37 to 39, Jesus used the story of Noah (Gen 6-9) to say what the Parousia would be like. This Old Testament story is a universal picture of God's relationship with humanity, from before the time of Abraham, and describes God's destruction of humanity because of sin and its recreation through the family line of Noah. After the Flood God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants promising never to destroy all the people again because of sin (9:8ff); and the sign of His promise is the famous rainbow.

In our passage, Jesus described the 'coming of the Son of Man' (24:39) as like the Flood for three reasons, firstly, because it was sudden. The Flood came as a complete surprise to all, just as natural disasters catch people unawares to this day. People were not ready because they ignored God in their sin, and only Noah heard the voice of God telling him what to do, and he did what God said and built a boat even though the instruction seemed odd. This, then is the second theme; obedience. We are asked to be obedient to our Lord when facing the prospect of the Parousia, just as Noah was obedient facing the Flood.

The third theme is the judgement on sin made by God through the Flood, bringing death and destruction. It has been hinted at on occasions in Jesus' teaching, but this is the first clear indication that Christ's return will bring God's 'final judgement' on all people (see following verses 40,41). When this happens the covenant made between God and Noah (Gen 9:8ff) will end because all creation will end; the Parousia is the end of everything as we know it.

The one taken, and one left Next, Jesus gave two examples of God's judgement (214:40,41). These two short word pictures are almost identical; firstly of two men separated whilst working in a field; and secondly, of two women separated whilst working. This story is one of the scariest things Jesus ever said, and this picture has haunted people for centuries. People say, 'what will happen if I wake up one morning and find that my husband, wife or friend has been taken?'

These fears are quite unfounded. When the Parousia happens, the consequences will be immediate, like the Flood, and once it has happened all else will be irrelevant because everything will have changed. We should fear God's judgement itself, and not merely the means of separation. Secondly, this story also describes the importance of being obedient to God in the midst of our normal work. Note that these verses do not mention the Parousia themselves; indeed, it is not immediately clear who is judged, those who are taken or those who remain! Other scriptures may help us to understand this, such as 1 Thess 4:17 which talks about being 'caught up in the air' at the last, but this only offers a hint of an explanation. The point of the story is the completeness of the separation between those who are faithful to God and those who choose to remain in sin.

Again, we are constantly asked to be ready for God judgement, and it is clear that this readiness must permeate every part of life. Those who have accepted Christ, of course, will know in their hearts whether they are ready.

The thief in the night! The final three verses from today's passage drive home the same points but in a different way. The famous story of the 'thief in the night' contains a strange paradox, casting us as the house-owners and God as the unpredictable thief; but the point is straightforward. The story graphically illustrates that not being ready leaves a person open to losing everything, and for that reason we should be ready for His return(24:44). The story reminds us of Jesus' previous teaching in which he urged people not to store up 'treasure on earth' (Matt 6:19-21), for by doing God's will, we store up treasure 'in heaven'.

The 'thief in the night' is a picture that stays in the mind, like other great images of Jesus' teaching such as 'the sower', or 'walking on water', and it deserves to be remembered with these as an important aspect of faith. Certainly other New Testament writers picked it up; Paul in 1 Thessalonians says, 'the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.' (1 Thess 5:2), and Peter likewise, 'but the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away' (2 Peter 3:10; see also Rev 3:3, 16:15).

Jesus repeats His point again at the end (24:44), having said it twice previously in this passage alone (24:39,42). The triple emphasis is significant, as there are only a few things that Jesus is reported to have repeated like this in his teaching, for example, 'love one another' (three times, in John 13:34,35, 15:12, 15:17). Matthew reported this saying three times because it was important. If we fail to prepare, we will begin the slippery slope of disobedience in discipleship. In the end, this will compromise more than our attitude to the Parousia, it will damage the heart of our relationship with God and make us less likely to stand at the last judgement.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which of these three stories of Jesus do you find the most helpful in understanding the Parousia?
2. Are Christians taught to live as if the Lord is coming again in glory? If not, why not, and how should this be remedied?
3. Why do you think that the picture of the 'thief in the night' has caught people's imaginations, even though it describes God as a 'thief'?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The whole of the study today feeds straight into the great themes of Christian discipleship. The point of Jesus' words are not to make us ignore the Parousia, but to be aware of it and let it motivate us to right attitudes in our discipleship. Our Lord wants us to love our neighbours and live lives that testify to His saving grace, for example, and not to back away from society because we expect the Lord's return and try to do God's work by separating ourselves from the world. When the Lord comes, I hope He finds you and I doing what He has taught, and what He expects of us.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In the light of Christ's coming again, what are the key things that God requires of you as His disciple? What should you be found doing when He comes? Pray about this, for the answers may be complex, but they are important.*