WONDERING, WAITING AND WATCHING FOR HIS RETURN

Matthew 24:36-51

Last week was Easter and we our attention was appropriately focused on the resurrection of Jesus, Matthew 28. Today we’re going to step back in time – rewind back to the week leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. The setting is on the Mount of Olives – that’s the mountain that overlooks Jerusalem on the east side. Bethany, the little village where Jesus and His disciples are staying, is nearby. Jesus is sitting down with His disciples and teaching them as they overlook the city of Jerusalem. The disciples ask Jesus questions and He answers them. Our passage this morning, Matthew 24, plus Matthew 25, along with the parallel passages Mark 13 and Luke 21 are called the “Olivet Discourse” because it contains Jesus lengthy teaching about the end times as told to His disciples on the Mount of Olives.

A brief disclaimer: Eschatologically I am what is referred to as “pretrib-premil,” pre-tribulational and premillennial. I believe that the church will be removed by God (raptured out) prior to the tribulation period. I believe that when Jesus returns again He will establish His earthly kingdom. I believe that this kingdom will be a literal 1,000 year physical reign of Jesus from Jerusalem (thus the term “millennial kingdom”). Now I am not dogmatic about any of this. This is what I believe based on the chronology of events in Revelation (as I understand them) and based on Jesus’ teaching in the Olivet Discourse, some of which we’re going to look at this morning.

READ Matthew 24:3

The disciples ask 2 questions – “When?” and “What?” “When will these things be?” and “What will be the sign?” And Jesus is going to answer these questions in reverse order. He will answer the “what” first and then the “when.”

From verses 4-14 the Lord first explains that, in contrast to what the disciples think, His Kingdom on earth will not come immediately. The great Messianic Kingdom promised by the OT prophets will be delayed. Instead there will be a period characterized by false Christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, false religions, secularism, as well as the preaching of the gospel. Such events will typify the era from the time of Jesus’ prophecy here in Matthew 24 up to the great tribulation period. This is the era of time that we are living in right now, in 2017.

From verses 15-22 Jesus talks about a period of great tribulation (Dan 9 and Rev 6-18). The last part of the tribulation period will be worse than the first. There will be the “abomination of desolation” when the antichrist sets up an image in the temple (2 Thess 2 and Rev 13). Basically the antichrist will abolish the established false world religion and get the people to worship him alone as God (Dan 9, 11, 12, 2 Thess 2). During this period, the Lord judges the earth (all kinds of terrible natural disasters will occur, the seal judgments, trumpet judgments and bowl judgments of Rev 6-16). God judges all of the unbelieving people of the earth. It’s a terrible period involving the loss of life of over half the earth’s population. It is also during this period of time that God prepares the nation of Israel spiritually for Jesus’ second coming and the setting up of the Kingdom. As I stated at the beginning, I personally believe that the church will be removed prior to the great tribulation. With the church’s removal and the restraining power of the Holy Spirit gone, this will allow for evil to spread unchecked and create an opportunity for the antichrist to rise to power.

From verse 23-31 Jesus talks about the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. This occurs shortly after the tribulation. There is the sound of a trumpet and the Lord returns (Dan 7, 1 Thess 4, Rev 19)

Verses 32-35 tell us that these last events will all happen quickly. All of these verses, from 4-35 are Jesus’ rather lengthy and detailed response to the disciple’s question, “what will be the sign?” Now Jesus will answer the disciple’s question, “when will these things be?”

READ Matthew 24:36

Jesus answers the disciple’s “when” question in just one verse. His answer is simple. When? Nobody knows except the Father only. No human being knows. The angels in heaven don’t know. At this particular time not even the Lord Jesus Himself knows. In Philippians Paul talks about how Jesus when He became a man, took on human flesh, “emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” (Phil 2:7) In other words, Jesus is still God, but while He is in human flesh He has voluntarily set aside the display of His divine attributes, such as omniscience and omnipresence, and He has submitted Himself to the Father’s will and to the Spirit’s direction. To put it another way, He is still God but has chosen not to exercise certain divine prerogatives.

Now, even though we do not know the exact day and time of Jesus’ return we do know that (1) He IS coming back some day and (2) we have been given enough revelation, signs to look for, that will immediately precede His return. So, we can gauge in a general sense when He will return based on events that we observe. So how should we respond while we are waiting for His return? In the rest of our passage today Jesus is going to tell us how we should respond.

READ Matthew 24:37-39

So, how did the people of Noah’s day live their everyday lives just prior to the great flood? Life went on as usual. They didn’t worry themselves about the future. Well, weren’t they aware of what was getting ready to happen? Jesus says in v 39 that “they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away.” But they should have been aware, right? They had been told. How’s that? Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us that Noah was a “preacher (or a herald) of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). It took Noah 120 years to build the ark. During that time I’m sure that he must have constantly been asked what he was building and why. His answer to anyone who asked might have gone something like this: “God’s judgment is coming on the earth. The world is full of evil and violence so God has decided to destroy the world with a great flood. Everything on the earth is going to die. Only those who are on the ark that I’m building will live. Wouldn’t you like to join me and my family and be saved from the flood? There is plenty of room.” Of course people just laughed at him and thought he was crazy. They knew what Noah said. But they didn’t believe him and they didn’t care. Their attitude was “It’s never rained before, so we have nothing to worry about.” OK, so tell me, what happened to all those people in Noah’s day when the flood finally came? They perished.

Jesus says that this same attitude of apathy and unbelief will exist just prior to the Lord’s return. “So will be the coming of the Son of Man,” v 39.

READ Matthew 24:40-42

At first glance this sounds like the rapture, right? But that’s not the context of this passage. The context is the return of Jesus shortly following the tribulation. The church has already been raptured, so it can’t be talking about that.

The word “taken” in v 40 and 41 is the Greek word *paralambano* [pronounced par-al-am-ban'-o] to receive near, to take with one’s self. It’s the same word used in Matt 2:14 for Joseph: “And he rose and **took** the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt…” It’s the same word used in Matt 4:8 for the devil at the temptation of Christ: “Again the devil **took** Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world…” So the word simply means to take, to lead someone away to another place.

So how does this apply to our passage? When Jesus returns, humanity will be divided. Just as in Noah’s day those who were not on the ark were swept away, those on the ark lived. So shall it be with the coming of the Son of Man, those who are not in Christ, unbelievers, will be taken away to judgment and ultimately to hell. Those who are in Christ will remain alive to rule with Jesus in His kingdom. Jesus talks more about this in Matthew 25 in His discussion about separating the sheep from the goats (believers and unbelievers) and the final judgment.

By the way, the people in Noah’s day who waited until the last minute to repent, until they felt the first raindrop, were too late. By the time they made it to the ark the Lord had already shut Noah and his family in. And it won’t be any different at Jesus’ second coming. The signs will all be there just as Jesus predicted – all those things He mentions in v 29 – “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the heaven, and the powers of the heaven will be shaken.” But for the most part nobody will care. They will either ignore the signs or they will attempt to dismiss what they observe with some scientific explanation. But then Jesus will return with the angels and by then it will be too late to repent. So Jesus admonishes us to “stay awake.” The NASB says “Be on the alert!”

So we are not just waiting. There is a big difference between just waiting and being on the alert. Have you ever gone to meet a friend or loved one at the airport? As the people who just got off the plane approach nearer to you, you keep a close watch for the person you’re waiting for. Many passengers will file by, but you’re intently looking for that one special individual and when you finally see them, you rush over to meet them. On the other hand that rental car agent or a cab driver, they are merely waiting for the next customer to arrive. So you see the difference? Being on the alert evokes the idea of an eager expectation. Waiting is more passive and indifferent. We never know when our Lord will return for us so we need to be ready when He does! The writer of Hebrews says, “Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.” (Heb 9:28)

READ Matthew 24:43-44

When Jesus returns it will be unexpectedly. Although He has told us the signs of His coming He is not going to announce exactly when He will arrive. We need to be ready. We need to get our house in order. I see this as a word to both believers and to unbelievers. Just as we would prepare if we knew someone was going to try and steal our belongings, we need to prepare our hearts for His return with due diligence (getting saved, getting right with God, confessing sin, being obedient). We can’t be passive and just hope it doesn’t happen. You need to prepare for the inevitable. We can’t wait. We must act now. “Behold, now is the favorable time, behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Cor 6:2) Jesus’ admonition in v 44 is that “you also must be ready!”

Comment on my take away from studying the book of Revelation: don’t wait – get right with God now – If you put it off it will be too late

READ Matthew 24:45-51

Do you realize, saved or unsaved, believer or unbeliever, all of us have all been given a stewardship by God? God has given us life, our mind, our will, our emotions, possessions, resources, talents, abilities, opportunities, privileges, responsibilities – on and on the list goes. These are all gifts of God that we’ve been given, yes, to enjoy, but also to invest in the kingdom. One day we are going to give an account of ourselves to God. How I live my life says a lot about my relationship with Christ. In this teaching the faithful and wise servant is the one who is doing what the master has told him to do. And the wicked servant is the one living as though his master is never going to return.

READ 1 Peter 1:3-5

There is so much that we believers have already, that we can enjoy now. We have our salvation, we have the power of the Holy Spirit living in us, we have eternal life, we have the message of the cross and of redemption and we have an empty tomb that proves our Savior is alive. So much is ours now to celebrate and enjoy. But there is much more to come. We have yet to meet our Lord face to face. We have yet to experience the resurrection of our bodies and to receive a glorified body. We have yet to experience the second coming of Christ and all that it ushers in with it. We have yet to experience the Millennial Kingdom and all the fullness of His glory in eternity. We Christians must live with an eager expectation of what is coming and not just focus on the here and now.

Application: “Be on the alert!” Are you eagerly anticipating His return? “Be ready!” Are you putting off doing something that you know you need to do? If so, why are you waiting? “Be faithful and wise servants!” How are you living?

We’re going to sing an old hymn, “I Know Whom I Have Believed.” This is from 2 Tim 1:12. It’s Paul’s declaration of his faith in Christ.