

Distinct but Inseparable Series, No. 5

“Imminence and Delay”

Matthew 24:36-51

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We are considering these Lord’s Day mornings pairs of biblical truth and of existential realities that are unique both for their distinction from one another on the one hand – it is of critical importance to Christian theology that they not be confused – and, on the other, their inseparability. They are not the same thing, very obviously, but in biblical teaching they belong together and their relationship to one another is fundamental to a biblical worldview. We have so far considered *historia salutis*, the once for all accomplishment of salvation by Jesus Christ, and *ordo salutis*, the outworking of that salvation in an individual’s own space and time; 2) law and gospel, the moral obligations that God has imposed on the life of mankind and the message of deliverance from moral failure through Jesus Christ; 3) justification, the forgiveness of our sins, and sanctification, the transformation of our lives, distinct but inseparable dimensions of salvation; and 4) faith, our dependence upon the work of another for our salvation and works, the effort that the Bible everywhere requires of those who are being saved. This morning our distinct but inseparable pair concerns the Second Coming of Christ and the consummation of salvation: imminence, the soon coming of the Lord, and delay, the long wait for his appearance.

In the text we are about to read, we will find the Lord in the middle of a discourse about the future, about the circumstances that his disciples will face until he returns to the earth and brings to end human history as we know it. The “that day” in v. 36 connects what he has already said to this next paragraph. The day he is talking about in vv. 36-51 is that day or time he has been describing in vv. 27-35, the day of the coming of the Son of Man. One of the great difficulties facing the interpretation of vv. 29-31 as referring not to the Second Coming but to the spread of the gospel after Pentecost, the interpretation known as post-millennialism, is precisely the link between those verses and what follows signaled in v. 36 by the phrase “that day.” The problem is that hardly anyone disputes that vv. 36-51 concern the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age. But “that day” in v. 36 indicates that these verses are talking about the same event as the previous verses have described.

- v.36 It is the consistent theme of the following verses that the time of the Lord’s return to earth has not been revealed and will not be known ahead of time. There will be no prior warning. Most will be caught unawares but his disciples must be alert and ready. That is the theme of these verses. The fact that even Jesus does not know the time of his return is a striking demonstration of the genuineness of his human nature, with all the limitations of that nature still very much in place. He didn’t know; neither do we.

- v.39 While Noah and his family were prepared, the rest of mankind was oblivious to the coming judgment.

- v.41 As an illustration of the point made so far, two cameos of ordinary life are given: two men working in the field; two women at the mill. Again, the difference is not in what

people are doing or where they are when Jesus comes, but whether they are ready for him to return.

- v.43 Burglars don't advertise their arrival. You must always be prepared for the possibility of their targeting your home.
- v.45 Another little parable seals the point already made.
- v.51 The punishment meted out to the wicked servant in the parable reminds us that the Lord wasn't really talking about a farmer and his servant but about all men and their fate to be determined at the end of the age. The parables that follow in chapter 25 will elaborate and emphasize this point. "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" as a description of the eventual punishment of the wicked stands not only for the misery of the fate of those who die in unbelief but the nature of it: "the fruitless dwelling upon wasted opportunities." [Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 531]

The burden of the Lord's remarks is obvious enough: *be ready because you don't know when the Lord will return*. Since the Lord's ascension to heaven, forty days after his resurrection, Christians have supposed that he would return soon, even in their own lifetime. There is some New Testament evidence to suggest that earlier in his ministry even the Apostle Paul thought that he would, or at least might be alive in the world when Christ returned. By the end of his life he knew he would die before the Second Coming. And, if that were the case, generations of Christians since have had the same experience: thinking that his coming was near only eventually to realize that they would not see the Second Coming in their lifetime. I grew up among believers who were talking all the time of how events reported in their daily newspapers portended the return of Christ. The clock was ticking down to the end, so they thought.

This phenomenon does not stem only from wishful thinking being overtaken by realism. The Bible itself speaks sometimes in a way that would lead any earnest Christian to believe Jesus must be coming soon. Consider this statement of Paul:

"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." [16:20]

Or this of James:

"You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." [5:8]

Or this from Hebrews:

"For in just a very little while 'He who is coming will come and will not delay...'" [10:37]

Or this from Jesus himself in the last chapter of the Bible, a statement he makes twice in a few verses:

"Behold, I am coming soon!" [Rev. 22:12, 20]

No wonder it has seemed to generation after generation of devout Christians that it must soon be time for the Lord to return. In any case, there can be no denying that *imminence*, the nearness of the Lord's return, is a biblical teaching! The Lord is coming *soon*. The Bible says that. When skeptical biblical scholarship sees such statements, it thinks it knows what to do with them. This, it is said, was what every Christian thought at first, that the Lord's coming would be very soon if not in their own lifetime. But, as the years passed, and Jesus did not return, the Christians had to adjust their message to reflect the new reality. Passages like the one we read were added to the Gospels and some of the later letters of the New Testament now taught that Christians needed to be prepared for a long delay before the Lord's return. Imminence was the original teaching; delay was the correction made necessary by the passage of time. In other words, for these scholars, imminence and delay are distinct, but they are hardly inseparable. Indeed, the one replaced the other. You can have one – imminence – or you can have the other – delay – you cannot have both.

This sort of thinking has always left me utterly unconvinced. The argument is too contrived. If the Christians were rewriting the Bible to accommodate it to the unpleasant fact that they had obviously been misled about the Second Coming, and if they felt free to add new material to the Scripture, why didn't they feel equally free to take out the offending passages that promised the Lord's coming soon? That would have solved the problem entirely instead of creating the problem the church has been struggling with through the ages since! And why should we think this pair of biblical truths any different from a host of others that have always proved difficult to believe at one and the same time? It is absolutely characteristic of the Bible to teach us that the Lord is coming soon and, at the same time, not to be deceived by the years that pass without his coming! I cannot fully explain to you how to reconcile these two emphases in the Bible, any more than I can adequately explain to you the unity and the triple personality of God or the sovereignty of God and the freedom and accountability of man. But there they lie side by side on page after page of the Word of God.

The fact is, it is now some 2000 years since Christ said that he would come again to the world to gather his elect from the four winds and to punish the wicked. If "coming soon" means longer, perhaps much longer than 2000 years, how are we to understand such statements? Well the answer to that question begins to emerge when we notice that side by side with these statements that seem to suggest that the Second Coming is imminent, could come very soon, are statements that very clearly suggest that there will be a delay, that Christ will not return to earth as quickly as people might have thought.

You have these statements here about a master going on a long journey and whose slowness in returning proves a temptation to his servant. And, before this, in this same Matthew 24, we have a description of the long reach of years that must follow before the end of the age: wars and rumors of wars, famines, and the preaching of the gospel to the whole world. And in Matthew 25:5 and again in v. 19 we will hear that the bridegroom or the master was a long time in coming..."

In fact, on another occasion, recorded in Luke 19, the Lord told a similar parable of a man of noble birth who went to a distant country..." And we are told that that parable was told precisely

to contradict the impression that many people had that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. Peter famously addresses the issue head on in his second letter and, in speaking of the Second Coming and the skepticism that some have expressed precisely because it hadn't occurred yet, he reminds his readers:

“...do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. *The Lord is not slow* in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

“The Lord is *not* slow in coming,” says Peter. “But our time is not his time.” There would be no reason to offer that explanation if, in fact, there had not been a reason to expect that the Lord Jesus would return sooner than he has. The reason was, of course, that he had said he would come soon! In any case, we have a very typical biblical juxtaposition of competing truths. We have, in regard to the Second Coming, imminence in some passages and delay in others, often in the same authors, even the same books, sometimes even in the same paragraphs. And the application is precisely the one we have before us at the end of Matthew 24. We must live in the tension of not knowing when Christ will return, of being certain that he shall but not knowing when. Here in Matthew 24 and elsewhere in the New Testament we are told that we will have to remain alert, on guard, watchful, *precisely because we do not know, no one knows, when Christ will return to earth, bring final salvation to his people, and judgment to the earth.*

In the Bible, that tension is created by saying in one place that the Second Coming is imminent, coming soon and by saying in another place that we must be prepared for delay. In the New Testament, the adverb “in a little while” is used both of events that occurred almost immediately and of the Second Coming that has not occurred for two thousand years. But obviously we are not thinking rightly about the Second Coming, and, more importantly, have not prepared ourselves for it, unless we hear both the “coming soon” and the “do not be deceived by the delay.” The two together make for the practical application that we have before us at the end of Matthew 24. We must live in the tension of not knowing when Christ will return, of being certain that he shall but not knowing when, and of the possibility that he might return at any moment. The “coming soon” and the “in a little while” are not only true because in the totality of time his coming *is* soon, but because they serve to heighten our sense of expectation, expectation that leads to readiness.

In fact, our text explains *why* it is right that we should not know the time of his coming again. If Christians were to have known centuries, even millennia ago, that the Lord Jesus would not return for thousands of years, it could not have helped but foster a spirit of carelessness and indifference. Not knowing leaves every generation of believers under an obligation to watch, to remain awake, which is the best possible state or condition for a believing heart to be in. The Lord was interested in our remaining awake! Paul will be as well. He will tell the Thessalonian Christians the same thing: “So then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert...” And what will make us so? Paul said what Jesus said: the prospect of Christ's coming again like a thief in the night. The fact of it, the prospect of it, no matter when it will happen, concentrates the mind and keeps it alert. If Samuel Johnson could say that the prospect of being hung in two weeks tends to concentrate the mind, surely the prospect of the end of the world

ought to concentrate the believer's mind. He does not know that it will happen in two weeks, *but he does not know that it won't happen very soon!* In the days of Noah and his contemporaries, there was a time of waiting, in that case quite a long time, and then a sudden catastrophe. The point is precisely that it was too late to seek salvation, too late to serve the Lord once the rain began to fall. It will be too late to seek the Lord or to repent of one's sins when the sign of the Son of Man appears in the sky.

Christians, of course, have allowed these two truths – imminence and delay – to become separated from one another times without number throughout the history of the church and always to sad effect. Imminence has far too often been lost altogether, the sense of Christ's near return. In my copy of the American Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* one can calculate the date of Easter into the 9th millennium, the 8,000s, 6,000 years from now. That chart does not encourage anyone to live in the active expectation of the Lord's return. On the other hand, the biblical warnings that the Lord will be away for a long time have likewise been forgotten. How many times have believers been told that the Lord would return on such and such a date or in the next few years only to be disappointed by the passage of time!

In a particularly noble passage in one of his sermons, in fact a sermon entitled "Christ Coming Quickly," the 19th century Scottish Presbyterian Robert Candlish said this:

"To a believer, the mere possibility, or even absolute certainty, of ages being yet to elapse before the Lord come again, ought no more to diminish the influence of that event upon his mind, and heart, and conscience, than the fact of ages having elapsed since the Lord came at first lessons the moral weight of his constant vivid sight of Christ and him crucified. . . . I know no chronology and no chronological computation of long eras, in dealing with that Savior, who eighteen hundred years ago trod with his blessed feet the soil of Judea and expired on the cross of Calvary. Then why should there be any real difficulty in applying this principle in the prospect, more than in the retrospect? Does faith mounting up in the ascending series of years to the opening up of the fountain, long centuries ago, lose all sense of distance and remoteness, in the bright and vivid apprehension of the cross? And will not the same faith in its keen glance downwards and onwards along the stream of time, seize the one great and only object of its hope, and bring it near, even to the very door, aye, though ages may seem to come in between? . . . These are the two events, the death of shame, the coming in glory, which faith, when rightly exercised, grasps; which I, believing, grasp. I grasp them as equally real, equally near. Christ dying, near and present, Christ coming, near and present. What though ages have run since that death and ages more are perhaps to run before that coming! It is nothing to me. . . . Wherever I am, whatever I am about, ought I not to be alive to my position between these two manifestations of Christ and these alone? Behind me Christ dying; before me Christ coming. Is it not thus, and only thus, that I live by the faith of him who loved me and gave himself for me; that I live also by the power of the world to come; enduring as seeing him who is invisible?" [Cited in I. Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 215-216]

That is the idea of our text beautifully put in another way. And so, it has been for endless generations of Christ's followers. They have lived with a view to the Lord's coming again and

the end of the world as we know it; with a view to the eternal life and eternal woe that begins when Christ returns. Here is St. Patrick in the long ago 5th century:

“God heard my prayers so that I, foolish though I am, might dare to undertake such a holy and wonderful mission *in these last days* – that I, in my own way, might be like those God said would come to preach and be witness to the good news to all nonbelievers *before the end of the world.*” [Cited in Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, 125]

Patrick was not some strange fellow who walked the streets of Ireland carrying a sign proclaiming the end of the world. He didn't necessarily believe that the world would end in his lifetime. In fact, he made elaborate preparations for the work of the gospel to continue in Ireland after he had died. But he thought of his work in terms of the great day of the Lord. He knew the day of salvation was drawing to a close. He knew that the Second Coming was a fixed date that was drawing nearer every day. It was the great fact that kept him thinking about his life and work in terms of its eternal significance.

Or come down closer to our time. Henry Thornton was an English banker and a member of what was called “the Clapham Sect,” the group of ardent Christian men and women, a number of them members of parliament, the most famous of whom was William Wilberforce, whose Christian commitment motivated them to move heaven and earth to end slavery in the British empire and to work toward other forms of social justice as well as to spread the gospel through the world. The young Prime Minister, William Pitt, once asked Henry Thornton why he had voted against him on one occasion in parliament. Thornton replied,

“I voted today so that if my Master had come again at that moment I might have been able to give an account of my stewardship.” [In Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 173]

The English journalist and historian, the socialist R.C.K. Ensor, no evangelical Christian himself, writing about evangelical religion in Victorian England, said,

“...its certainty about the existence of an after-life of rewards and punishments [was an essential feature]. If one asks how nineteenth-century English merchants earned the reputation of being the most honest in the world...the answer is: because hell and heaven seemed as certain to them as tomorrow's sunrise, and the Last Judgment as real as the week's balance-sheet.” [173]

This is the Lord's point. The conviction of the Lord's coming again, the certainty that his return will bring an end to this age, and that following hard upon his Second Coming will be the beginning of eternal bliss or eternal woe for all men; I say that conviction *ought* to keep us not only awake, alert, mindful, but careful to live our lives *as we are going to want to have lived them* when that day dawns, whether in our lifetime or many lifetimes from now.

How much would change if only people could see far in the distance the Lord Christ descending from heaven with the heavenly hosts in his train. *But men are all oblivious of the one thing that must absolutely define their lives.* The Lord has not returned these many generations and they have lost all thought of his coming. As the Luther theologian John Gerhard once put it, “Oblivio

huius iudicii est mater securitatis.” (“A forgetfulness of this judgment is the mother of security.”) [*Loci Theologici*, xix, 300. It is *the* mark of human life generally in our day, as in most days, that men live with no sense of a coming day of reckoning.

How differently people live when they don't know or don't take care to know what catastrophe is coming. We have learned again and again how differently events would have unfolded if only people had known ahead of time the catastrophe that was soon to befall them: whether man-made, such as 9-11 or earthquakes or hurricanes. But, as in the days of Noah, it was too late to take the proper steps once the airliner was striking the building or the winds and waves were crashing into cities and towns along the coast. There was, of course, no way to prevent the catastrophe. But so much would have been done by so many people had they only realized what in fact was coming!

But if this principle holds in the case of a hurricane, how much more does it apply to the Second Coming and the end of the age! If one lives his life ignorant of the way in which human life will end, forgetful of the great issue of human life, of the eternity that stretches beyond the return of Jesus Christ; if he pays no attention to the warning that many will be, must be consigned to the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, then how differently one will live his or her life.

In his *God (A Play)*, Woody Allen writes, “The trick is to start at the ending when you write a play. Get a good strong ending and then write backwards.” Well, exactly right. And what is true of a play is far more true of real life. It is the ending that determines the meaning of and that makes interesting and important the story from its beginning. It is the ending that determines what we are going to think of the story when it is done. You can't know the meaning, the significance of anything if you don't know how things end, how the story turns out. Our death is but the end of one chapter of the story; it is not the end of the story. The ultimate end, the end that determines the meaning of all that comes before and after is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

We have been told the ending. Christ Jesus is coming again. He will bring salvation and judgment with him. Eternal weal or woe awaits every human being on that day. *That* is the ending. It is now ours to write the play. But our play must do justice to such an ending as that. It can't be a dull, uninteresting, insignificant, and largely pointless story that leads up to such a climax that engulfs the entire world and spells doom or exhilaration for every human being. If it would be a play worthy of *that* ending, it must be a story that has that ending in view and is leading up to it with eyes wide open. That is the Lord's point. We are to live awake; alert to what is coming, whenever it comes. To live in that way, we need to know both that the Lord is coming soon and to know not to be distracted by the delay of his return!