

Matthew 24

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Amen. Do you be seated?

And turn, if you will, to Matthew chapter 24.! Matthew chapter 24. It should have been Glenn Scrivener! preaching this morning. I was really looking forward! to hearing him, as you were.

But he is self-isolating in Eastbourne. And I have said, if anyone sees him out and about in Eastbourne, call me. So, I know you were probably looking forward to a break.

And so was I. I just want to speak a little bit about communion for a moment. You'll see that, as Adrian said earlier, we're going to be doing it a little bit differently. After the hymn, after the sermon, there will be hand sanitizer that's going around. Great if you could use that.

That is not baptism. All right. But please do that. We're going to be using little cups just during this period. There will be some of you here that just feel that you don't want to take communion today, and that's really fine.

[1 : 11] You shouldn't feel any pressure towards that at all. And I think the servers will go up and down the rows, and so you will be served. Have I got that right?

Okay. So we don't need to talk about that later. You know what's happening. Let's bow our heads in prayer. Heavenly Father, we praise you because your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the everlasting King.

We praise you, Jesus, that you left the glory of heaven to come and live on this earth, to die on the cross, and to bear our sin, and to rise from the dead.

And we praise you that by your Holy Spirit you are with us even today. We praise you that one day you are coming back again. One day every single one of us will face you, and we will have to give an account of our lives to you.

And so we pray that you would help us to be ready for that day, to be active in your service whenever that moment comes. And please speak to us, help us to heed your voice, and to respond to your love for your namesake.

[2 : 22] Amen. We don't really draw the crowds, do we? Christianity doesn't dominate the media.

In this week, Christianity has not united and motivated the nation. Most people think that church this morning is irrelevant.

Some might even think it's dangerous. And we've seen this week, haven't we, in the media, no one has really cared for the opinion of church leaders. And consequently, we live in a pretty apathetic and a pretty cynical culture.

And so the question is, where is God today? Where is God in this world of suffering? And why bother with God? people are indifferent, aren't they?

However, in the last week, last 10 days, people have become, again, once again, aware of their fragility and their frailty.

[3 : 32] That we're not totally in control. And life is brief, isn't it? Fragile. Hence the panic. Macbeth, reflecting on the brevity of life, he once said this, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time.

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. And this morning, I want us to look briefly and I hope simply and I hope clearly at the world's tomorrow, God's tomorrow and our tomorrow.

And I hope to finish today. First of all, the world's tomorrow. What is the world's tomorrow? What is it? I wonder if I asked that question what you'd shout back at me.

I think you'd probably shout back uncertain. Now this chapter, 24, it's not really an exposition this morning but we're going to take some thoughts here from Matthew 24.

It begins with disciples looking at the stones, doesn't it, in the glorious temple of Jerusalem and how wonderful those stones are. And Jesus says to his disciples, as great as this building is, there won't be one stone left upon another that will not be thrown down.

[5 : 01] It's precarious even then, the world's tomorrow. And they ask him, when will this be? What will be the sign that it's about to happen? That the temple in Jerusalem will fall and what will be the sign of your coming at the close of the age?

The chapter's divided into those two halves. The first half about the destruction of Jerusalem and the second half about when Jesus will come again. And Jesus goes on to stress the danger of the world's tomorrows.

He speaks of wars and rumors of wars. He speaks of nations rising up against nations, of kingdoms turning against kingdoms.

He says there'll be famines and earthquakes in various places and so on. And they were signs for that generation that was listening to him. And today, we know, don't we, that in our society it's equally uncertain.

Isn't that one of the issues? The uncertainty of tomorrow? We just don't know, do we? We genuinely just don't know.

[6 : 08] It's unpredictable. The writer of the Proverbs says, boast not of tomorrow because you do not know what a day will bring forth.

The Apostle Peter says in 2 Peter 3, the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise and heavenly bodies will disappear in fire and the earth and everything in it will be burnt up.

It's a terrifying, striking phrase. Jesus speaks here, doesn't he, in verse 29. He speaks of the sun being darkened, of the moon not giving its light, stars falling from heaven, powers of heaven shaking.

It's picture language. It's apocalyptic. It's cataclysmic. And the world's tomorrow is uncertain and frankly pretty bleak.

I think I need to say this, that is as true today as it was six months ago or even six years ago before any of us had heard of Brexit or coronavirus.

[7 : 26] That is the nature of life. It's just that we've become, haven't we, in the last week or so more painfully aware of the frailty and fragility of it. It's always been the same.

You've just woken up to it. The uncertainty of man's tomorrow. Secondly, what about God's tomorrow? What about God's tomorrow?

The Bible says that when it comes to closing time, it will emphatically be the Lord's time, the Lord's day, the day of the Lord. There's no uncertainty about God's tomorrow.

It will be the day of the Lord. He is the one who's got the whole world in His hands, including our very breath and our health.

He is the one who is sovereign, who controls everything. In Him, we live and move and have our being. And nothing that has happened last week and nothing that will happen this week is outside of His sovereign control.

[8 : 37] And the message to those first century Christians, those persecuted Christians in the first century, do you remember? When John writes to them in the book of Revelation, it can be summed up in one sentence.

The Lord reigns. The Lord reigns. The Lord is finally and ultimately on the throne of the universe. The Lord is in total and utter control.

control. The government is on the shoulders of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the message of the final book of the Bible. And in Matthew 24, Jesus spells out two great truths about God's tomorrow. That certain tomorrow that you and I will face. And these truths apply equally to Christ's return or, well, to your death, whichever comes sooner.

The first is this. It will be unexpected. Look at verse 36 with me. Look at verse 36. But concerning that day and hour, no one knows.

[9 : 43] Not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. No one knows. About 175 years ago, a Roman Catholic priest wrote a book predicting that the world would end in 1847.

He asked the Roman Catholic Church, he asked his church's authority, could he have permission to print the book? To publish this book that predicted that the world would end in 1847.

And the Roman Catholic Church said, yes, you should feel free to print the book in 1848. And that's very wise, isn't it? Very wise pastoral advice and guidance because nobody knows.

Nobody knows the day or the hour when Christ is going to return. The coming of Christ, it's described as a thief in the night. If you've ever been burgled, it's a horrible thing, isn't it?

But the thief didn't send a postcard the week before and say, dear sir or madam, I plan to burgle you 3.45 next Wednesday afternoon.

[10:57] You're sincerely the burglar. He didn't do that, did he? He didn't leave a voicemail just to say, just so you know, I'm planning to burgle the house this evening. Of course he didn't. They don't do that.

If you've been burgled, what is it? It's the sense of shock, isn't it, when you walk in. That sense of utter surprise that somebody's invaded your house and turned out your drawers, it's created chaos and it's always a total surprise and Jesus picks up that analogy.

And he says, if the householder had known what time of the night the thief was coming, well he would have watched. He'd been waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a baseball bat, wouldn't he? He'd have not let his house be broken into.

And he says, therefore you, you also must be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. And if you ever lock your flat or your home so as to be ready for a possible thief and who doesn't, how much more important is it to be ready for the certain coming of the Lord?

Unexpected. The second great truth about God's tomorrow is that it's unwanted. It's unexpected and it's unwanted. And it's unwanted tragically because so many are not ready to meet Jesus Christ.

[12:22] Jesus gives two illustrations to emphasize this. He talks about Noah in verses 37 and 38. He says this, for as were the days of Noah so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking it's a good thing. Marrying it's a good thing. Giving in marriage it's a good thing. Until the day when Noah entered the ark. And they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away and so it will be in the coming of the Son of Man.

There were things that they were preoccupied with. They're not necessarily bad things at all but just with things eating and drinking marrying giving in marriage but do you notice who they're not preoccupied with?

Do you notice who doesn't occupy their thoughts? They're not preoccupied with God. And when Jesus said they didn't know until the flood came and swept them away there was a sense in which they did know.

Because do you remember what is Noah? Noah was a preacher of righteousness. And that ark was like a great visual aid a great sermon and Noah was consistently preaching for 120 years about the coming of the Lord.

[13:52] But no one listened and no one bothered. And they couldn't be bothered with God. And they couldn't be bothered with God's word.

And so they didn't know until it happened. Isn't that equally true of our society today? So people say we can't possibly know about tomorrow.

So let's enjoy ourselves today. We entertain ourselves to death. We entertain ourselves to death because people are not bothered about God or his word.

Eat, drink, and be merry. Or eat, drink, and watch telly. For tomorrow we die. Perhaps we do die.

But tomorrow never comes. And so your friends and my friends are occupied with everything, aren't they, at the moment except God. And indifference to God and his word.

[14:57] What's the first and greatest commandment? You know it, don't you? What should be the greatest priority in our lives? Jesus says it's to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, everything that you are.

In other words, to put God at the center of our lives where he ought to be and where he demands to be. God. The trouble is, if we believe in God at all, we so often tend to assume, don't we, that we are the center of our world.

And if God exists, well he's somewhere out there, up in space, and occasionally I call him in from time to time to clear up the mess that I've got myself into.

I'm the center of my world, God is there up there, and if I need him I call and the servant comes rushing in and helps me out. And without realizing I treat almighty God like a servant who comes in

and clears out the mess and then we let him go again.

Because it's not convenient to have God around any longer. But you see, the truth this morning is God is not a servant. He is Lord.

[16:11] He is the Lord. And we are not at the center of the universe because God is. And the question this morning is not why should you bother with God, but why should God bother with you?

Why should God bother with me when I've turned my back on him and I've rebelled against him and I've done my own thing? Why should God bother with me? And there is no answer except that wonderfully he does.

He does in his infinite love and his mercy. But if then I don't bother with him or his word, the Bible warns me very clearly that judgment will come on those who do not know God.

And who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw earlier on in Matthew's gospel that Jesus will have to say to many people, depart from me because I don't know who you are.

And Jesus takes the example of Noah, but he also takes the example of daily work. So look at verse 40. Again, it's dramatic. It's picture language.

[17:25] Then two men will be in the field and one will be taken and one will be left. And two women will be grinding at the mill and one will be taken and one will be left. And therefore stay awake for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Amen. One is taken to be with Jesus, to be with him forever in heaven.

The other is left for judgment. Two men grinding at the mill, one taken to be with Jesus, one left.

Two men in the same business, one taken, one left.

Two people working in the same office, one taken, one left. Two people in the same house. Now I'm going to speak again about why I don't believe this kind of people kind of zoomed up and rapture.

Rapture, I don't believe that.

I don't think that's what Jesus is teaching here. Jesus is making a point and he's making a point about separation. That's his big point. Jesus says, watch therefore because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

[18:27] There is nothing, nothing uncertain about the Lord's coming. There's nothing uncertain about God's tomorrow. And although from our point it will be unexpected and tragically it may be unwanted by many.

But what about our tomorrow? That's my third point. What about our tomorrow? What about your tomorrow? John Betjeman was a poet, writer and a broadcaster. He died in 1984.

And he wrote this really interesting poem, Before the Anesthetic, it's called, or a real fright. And in this poem, John Betjeman imagines that he's lying in a hospital bed in Oxford before an operation. And he's listening to the tolling of St. Giles' bells. And this is what he writes. Intolerably sad, profound.

St. Giles' bells are ringing round. Swing up and give me the hope of life. Swing down and plunge the surgeon's knife.

[19:35] I, breathing for a moment, see death wing himself away from me. And think as on this bed I lie. Is it extinction when I die?

St. Giles' bells are asking now. And hast thou known the Lord? Hast thou? St. Giles' bells, they richly ring. And was that Lord our Christ and King?

St. Giles' bell, they hear me call. I never knew the Lord at all. Now lest this I should cease to be. Come, real Lord.

Come quick to me. There are two appointments that the Bible teaches that you and I must keep. And you can't put either of them in your diary or your Google calendar.

The first is death and the second is judgment. The first is death and the second is judgment after death. Two future certainties. The Bible teaches it's appointed for man once to die and after death comes the judgment.

[20:49] Are you ready for that day? I can think of illustrations. I can tell you of people who have been taken so suddenly.

But you don't need those illustrations this week, do you? Not one of us can boast about tomorrow. Have you faced this fact?

It shouldn't be such a surprise, should it? But we all know that in one sense we are dying. We know that. Nobody knows whether it will be a matter of days or weeks or months or years or decades.

Whatever it is. But I want to say to you this morning that the Bible holds out to you this absolute certainty of knowing the Lord. God. And so whatever the future holds, none of us here today know what the future is going to hold.

But we can know that with the Lord the best is yet to be. You cannot lose once you've lost your life to Jesus.

[21 : 59] But unless you've done that, you stand to lose absolutely everything. And so I'd like to ask you, where do you stand in your relationship with God?

What about your tomorrow? Do you know the Lord? Is he real in your life? Have you got that absolute peace deep within your heart that come what may, the best is yet to be.

The world's tomorrow is totally uncertain. God's tomorrow is totally clear. But one day you and I are going to meet with him.

But what about our tomorrow? What about your tomorrow? And of course, in one sense, what happens about your tomorrow depends entirely on your response to Jesus Christ today.

What do I mean about this response? It can be a cliché, can't it, that preachers use. But let me summarize it in two words. The first word is repent.

[23 : 17] The second word is receive. And if I want to be sure that I know Jesus Christ, there are two things that I must do. And the first is to repent.

It's an about turn. It's a U-turn. That instead of going through life my way and doing my own thing, I've got to be willing to let go of whatever is wrong in my life.

And with God's help, and only with God's help, to turn right around and to give my life to the Lord Jesus as my Savior who has died for me on the cross and is my Lord and my King over all.

And then receive. That we're ready to turn from what is wrong and put our lives lock, stock and barrel into the hands of Jesus. And we can receive Jesus or the Spirit of the Lord Jesus to come into our lives and he will be with us day and night.

He is there when the sun is shining. He is there when it's as dark as can be. He is there in our tomorrow, whatever our tomorrow holds. And one day when we walk through the shadow of the valley of death, he will be with us.

[24 : 36] And so we won't fear evil. Have you got that assurance today? And for those of you who would say no or I'm just not sure, you need to be willing to turn around and to let go of what you know is wrong and rebelling against him and ask the Lord Jesus Christ into your life.

And I know that at the moment some of you will be experiencing tug of war. There's a part of us that wants to do that, isn't there? And there's a part of us that really doesn't want to do that because we want to be in charge and we don't want the Lord Jesus to be in charge.

And I know that struggle. I felt that struggle. But how is it working out? How is it working out with you as Lord of your life, running it as you want and calling God in just very occasionally?

How is that working out for you? You've got no answer, have you? But if you will give in to God this morning, if you will repent, if you will turn from your wickedness and receive wonderful life in Christ, you can have hope, you can have certainty, you can have confidence.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we know that we have sinned.

[26 : 24] And we know that we need your forgiveness. We thank you for your son, the Lord Jesus, dying on the cross for sinners such as us.

We pray that by your Holy Spirit, you would give us the help to turn away from all that is wrong in our lives and to go with you. We ask that you would come into our lives, that you would be our saviour, that you would be our Lord.

Come in by your spirit to be with us always. We thank you for these wonderful promises. Keep us from a wrong fear, we ask. In Jesus' name.

Amen. We're going to sing before we come.