Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 24 as we continue to look at Jesus's teaching about the end of the world and his return. In these chapters, we're learning what Jesus has to say about the end of our story. The story of our lives and the story of our world. And we might describe the ending Jesus envisions as a *deus ex machina* type of ending. That term comes from the world of ancient Greek theater. There were certain stories in which the characters found themselves in such a tangled knot of trouble that all hope of resolution or salvation appeared lost. But then suddenly, a god would appear, using divine power to fix the problem. And sometimes, a crane would literally lower the actor portraying the god on to the stage. Hence the phrase, *deus ex machina,* which is Latin for "god from the machine."

Now, understandably, some critics consider this sort of ending lazy on the part of the playwright. I mean, any author can resolve all the tension, conflict, and danger by sending in a god. Where's the creativity, the ingenuity, in that? Fair enough. But here's the question I'd like us to consider: when it comes to the story we're living in, the story of this world, isn't this precisely what we need? After all, we have thousands of years of history to prove that human beings are incapable of bringing our story to a happy ending. We are in quite a tangled knot of trouble, and whenever someone declares we're on the cusp of saving ourselves, something happens to bring those hopes crashing down.

Rome pursued world-wide unity and security, but invasion from the outside and turmoil from within fractured the empire. Neville Chamberlain declared peace for his time, but Hitler betrayed him. Silicon Valley promises to enrich our lives and elevate our species, but with every new device and development comes a host of unintended consequences. So, we wonder, where will it all end? Is there anyone or anything that can bring our story to the resolution and salvation we long to experience? And the answer is yes, but we will not find it in any worldly kingdom, leader, or technology. Our hope must come from beyond this world. We need a *deus ex machina* sort of ending! Only, we do not need an actor dressed up as a god, we need the real thing. We need the true God to step in. Because, as theologians Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart write, "Only from the transcendent possibilities of God can this world be given a satisfying conclusion."[1] And here's the wonderful news: this is precisely what our God intends to do!

In one sense, he already has. 2000 years ago, the Son of God stepped into this world to secure the salvation of his people. And one day, he will return to bring that salvation to its culmination. He will return to bring our story to a happy ending. And that is why he—and he alone—is our hope. But what will that be like? What will happen when Jesus comes again? That's what Jesus begins to show us in our passage today. We'll see more in the weeks ahead, but here's what we learn in these verses:

- Jesus will come in unmistakable glory.
- Jesus will come at an unexpected hour.
- And Jesus will come soon.

Each of these truths has implications for our future *and* for our lives today. Let's consider them one at a time…

1. Jesus will come in unmistakable glory

Remember where we ended last week. Jesus told his disciples about five painful realities of life in this fallen world:

[1] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope,* 35.

- false messiahs,
- international conflicts,
- natural disasters,
- persecution, and
- apostasy.

He also talked about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70, as an example of the kind of calamity in which all these things occur at once. And Jesus told the disciples that these kinds of trials and tribulations would precede his return—as they have for the last 2000 years. But then he said the sign of his coming would be unmistakable. In Matthew 24:27-28 Jesus says, *For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather* (Matthew 24:27-28).

You don't have to guess if there's a storm when you see lightning. You don't have to guess if there's a carcass when you see a flock of vultures. And in the end, no one will need to guess if Jesus has really come. Every eye will see. Everyone will know. Then, in verses 29-31, Jesus elaborates on what we can expect when he comes in unmistakable glory. First, he says, there will be…

A. Heavenly signs

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken (Matthew 24:29).

Jesus is picking up on language used throughout in the Old Testament to describe cataclysmic, world-altering events. For example, when the prophet Isaiah descries the fall of Babylon, he says *the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light* (Isaiah 13:10). Later, when speaking about God's future judgment of all nations, Isaiah says how the stars *shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine* (Isaiah 34:4).

Jesus is using this familiar language to describe the world-altering nature of his return. And the language may be figurative, but it seems likely that Jesus is saying his return will be marked by heavenly signs which no eye has ever seen before. This is no mere eclipse or comet. This is a kind of cosmic disturbance which people around the globe will behold with wonder and dread. Notice the dread as Jesus speaks about the world-wide recognition of his return.

B. World-wide recognition

Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).

In the ancient world, a conquering king would raise the "sign" of his kingdom in the form of a banner as a mark of victory. Picture the winning army raising their flag at the end of a battle. Well, here Jesus's banner appears in the heavens as an unmistakable display of his victory over his enemies. And notice their reaction. They mourn. People from all the tribes of the earth lament! Revelation says they wail. Why? Because the one whom they passively

ignored or actively rejected has come. And as they see him arriving upon the clouds of heaven with power and glory, they know what they deserve. Like criminals in a secret hide-out, suddenly surrounded by red and blue flashing lights, people from across the planet will know the time has come to face justice. And they will be overwhelmed.

Listen to how Revelation 6:15-17 describes this scene. It says, *Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"* (Revelation 6:15-17).

It's a frightening scene, and if you are far from Christ this morning, you need to know this day is coming. But you also need to hear this good news: if you will trust in Jesus now, you will stand on that day with great joy! Notice how Jesus also describes…

C. The gathering of God's people

And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matthew 24:31).

When Christ comes to earth, he will gather his elect, his chosen ones, his people. His angels will go to the four winds of the earth, north, south, east, and west, and bring Christ's people into the perfections of Christ's presence. Revelation 21 tells us on that day death will be no more. Neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for these will be former things… which will have passed away. This is the eternal life Jesus has promised his people. And when he comes, he will gather us up and bring us into this blessing.

Brothers and sisters, can you imagine what that will be like? First, to see Jesus! To feel the overwhelming wonder and awe that will come when faith becomes sight! And then, to see each other! What a reunion that will be! Friends, family, children, spouses, believing loved ones whom death has taken, before our eyes once again! There are no words to describe the happiness in store for Christ's people when he comes again. So, take heart, weary Christian, Jesus will come in unmistakable glory. And stay alert, because…

2. Jesus will come at an unexpected hour

We'll come back to verses 32-35 in a moment but look at verse 36: *But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only* (Matthew 24:36).

At the beginning of Matthew 24, the disciples asked Jesus, when will you come again? And now he tells them no one knows. Sometimes, certain self-proclaimed prophets forget this verse and end up doing silly things. For example, there was a pastor who made the news this year for repeated declarations that Jesus would come to gather his people on September 23. Well, that day came and went, but the pastor doubled down. "Actually," he said, "September 23 started a countdown. The day is now October 12." Well, it's November 8. Don't ever buy this sort of thing. Jesus says, "No one knows." Not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

Now that may sound strange. Why does the Son not know? Remember, when Jesus walked this

earth, he did so as true God and true man. And in his humanity, he experienced human limitations. He was born as a baby. He grew weary, thirsty, and hungry. He died. And all throughout his earthly life, Jesus lived in real dependance upon the Father's will and the Father's word. And here he emphasizes that truth, trusting his Father with the time of his coming. But he is very clear: that day will come. And tragically, many people will be totally unprepared.

Look at verse 37: *For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man* (Matthew 24:37). Jesus's return will be like the story of Noah's Ark. How so? Verses 38-39: *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, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man* (Matthew 24:38-39). Despite everything we saw last week about life in this fallen world, with its false messiahs, international conflicts, and natural disasters, we know that people can carry on as normal, even in times of great turmoil.

A few years ago, I read a book about the relentless bombing of London during WWII, and how despite all the danger and destruction, the night life in the city kept going. Even Mary Churchill—the prime minister's daughter—participated in the fun. For example, on one evening in March, Mary attended a ball. As she entered the ballroom, she could hear anti-aircraft gun firing and bombs falling, but none of this stopped the event. Later, she wrote in her diary, "It seemed so easy to forget—there in the light and warmth and music—the dark deserted streets—the barking of the guns—the hundreds of men and women ready at their posts—the bombs and death and blood."[2]

In a way, this is one of humanity's greatest strengths. We can be very resilient. But it's also a weakness. Because our ability to keep calm and carry on can cause us to miss the warning signs, to ignore the fact that this world is fallen and headed for judgment, and to be totally unprepared when that day comes. And Jesus says, it will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Look at verses 40-41: *Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left* (Matthew 24:40-41). Two men will be working in a field, and suddenly, one will be taken. Two women will be grinding flour at the mill, and suddenly, one will be taken.

I know a whole series of books gets its title from these verses. But I'll just gently point out that Jesus doesn't say if the one who is "left behind" is the Christian or the non-Christian. It may be that the one taken is taken to the gathering of God's people. Or it may be that the one taken is taken away into judgment—like those swept away by the flood. The point is, when Jesus comes, there will be a definitive and final separation. And Jesus's clear application comes in verse 42: *Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming* (Matthew 24:42). Stay awake. Keep alert. Remain vigilant. Jesus emphasizes this with a little parable.

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 (Matthew 24:43). Obviously, Jesus is not saying he is a criminal coming to steal your stuff. This parable has one point: if you knew someone was coming to break into your house you wouldn't go to

[2] Erik Larson, *The Splendid and the Vile,* 385.

bed. And if you live with the knowledge of Christ's impending return, you won't be lulled into a spiritual slumber, you'll stay awake! You'll get ready. *Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect* (Matthew 24:44).

So, how do you get ready for the return of Jesus? Two words: faith and faithfulness. First, faith. Friend, I hope you are hearing all of this, the warning that Jesus will come in judgment, like the flood came in Noah's day. But I also hope you are hearing the hope Jesus offers his people, those who he will gather to himself, spare from the judgment, and bless for all eternity. And if you're wondering, how can I get in on this? How can I become one of Christ's people, so that I might anticipate his return with joy and hope? Well, the answer is faith! The good news at the heart of the Bible is that God saves sinners—like you and like me—by grace through faith.

The first time Jesus came into this world he died on a cross to pay the penalty for our rebellion. He rose again to deliver us from the power of death. And he offers life-changing grace to all who believe in him. Trust in him, and you will have nothing to fear when he returns. This is how you get ready for that day: faith. And faithfulness. In response to his grace, we want to walk in faithfulness until he comes. That will be the focus of our entire message next week. But this morning, know this…

- Jesus will come in unmistakable glory.
- Jesus will come at an unexpected hour.

And lastly…

3. Jesus will come soon

Let's go back to verses 32-33: *From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates* (Matthew 24:32-33).

We're descending into winter here in Chicagoland, but before long, the trees will begin to bud once again. And when we see the branches changing colors, with little red and green beads pushing through, we will know, warmth is near! In the same way, Jesus says, when you see all these things, you will know I am near. But what does Jesus mean by "all these things"?

When you first read this, you might think he's referring to the heavenly signs, the world-wide recognition, and the gathering of his people. But that's incorrect for two reasons. First, those are the things that will happen *when* Jesus returns, not *before* he returns. Second, if "all these things" refers to all the things that happen when Christ comes, then what Jesus says next becomes very problematic. Look at verse 34: *Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place* (Matthew 24:34).

Without exception, every time Jesus uses the phrase "this generation" in Matthew, he is talking about the disciples' generation. So, Jesus is telling these twelve men, you will not die until you see all these things take place. Now, that basically leaves us with three interpretive options.

First, Jesus was wrong. He said he would come back within the lifetime of the disciples, but he didn't. But this cannot be. And it is not at all required by the text. Because second, "All these things" could refer to everything surrounding the destruction of the temple in 70AD. Which the disciples asked about in verse 3, and which Jesus described in verses 15-22. But there is a third—and I believe better—way to read this. "All these things" refers to all the things Jesus has

named throughout this chapter, which will take place in the world before he comes again. Everything we saw last week: False messiahs, international turmoil, natural disasters, persecution, apostasy, and occasional calamities in which all these things occur at once.

There is no question, the disciples saw all of this in their lifetime. Their generation did not pass away until these things had all taken place. And these things have continued to take place throughout history up to the present day. But here is Jesus's great encouragement, especially when we grow weary with the pain and the angst of living in this fallen world. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away* (Matthew 24:35).

Jesus is saying whatever else happens, whatever changes, crumbles, and comes crashing down, in the face of all the danger and darkness and discouragement that exists in this world, his word will never fail! His promise will stand! And what is that promise? Well, he puts it very succinctly in Revelation 22:12 when he says, *Behold, I am coming soon* (Revelation 22:12).

Church, he is near. At the very gates. He will come soon. And it's true that with God, a thousand years is as a day. So, it may not be tomorrow, but in the scope of eternity his coming is very close. And far sooner than we often imagine or think, we will see him. And on that day, only one thing will matter. Did we believe in him, and walk with him, and look forward to his coming? Or did we ignore him, reject him, and look to someone or something else in this world for hope?

All other hopes will fail. But those who hope in Jesus will never be put to shame. Trust him! He is coming in unmistakable glory. He is coming at an unexpected hour. He is coming soon. And when he does, when he descends onto the stage of this world once again, he will bring our story to a happy conclusion.