

Introduction

Matthew 24 (and 25) records the Olivet Discourse. In this section of teaching, our Lord functions distinctively in the role of a prophet. The discourse is a reply to the twofold question of the disciples regarding the time and the sign of His coming (24.3, **As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"**). Jesus answers the question in reverse order. He first explains the signs of His coming (4-31), and then He comments on the time of His coming (32-36). The section on the signs is a prophetic vision with two mini-stories within it. The signs of His coming are the appearance of false messiahs and prophets, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, gospel proclamation to all nations, tribulation (first mini-story, 4-14), and great tribulation in anticipation of *the* great tribulation of eternal judgment (second mini-story, 15-31).

Having addressed the matter of the signs, Jesus then turns to the matter of the time to answer the question: "when will these things be?"

³² "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. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only (Mat. 24.32-36).

You should notice the contrast that is here between verses 32-35 and verse 36 per the word "but," which is the linchpin connecting these passages together. Furthermore, note that the first part is positive and the second part is negative: Jesus teaches what we can know and then what we cannot know about the time of His coming. We will therefore have two points, but we will begin with the negative: what we do not know regarding the time of His coming. After we cover that point, we will take up the positive: what we do know regarding the time of His coming.

1A. What we do *not* know regarding the time of His coming

A critically important thing that we should know about the time of the return of Christ is that the day and hour are unknown. That is, it is not ours to know the time in any specific and exact way. With all the signs in place, Jesus plainly states the fact that they do not give us a basis by which to make calculations about the end of the world. That is not the function of the signs. That is not why He gives teaching regarding the signs. This point about what we do not know is important to the Lord, it is so important to Him that we get this message without mistake that He goes on to say some things *about what He knows*. Actually, He says some remarkable things about what He does *not* know, **But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only** (24.36). Interestingly, He says no human being knows, the angels of heaven do not know, and the Son (God the Son) does not know the day or hour of His return.

He speaks of His ignorance as a fact. There is no hint of rebellion no moral neglect in this ignorance, as the root "to ignore" might indicate. It expresses His true humanity. Moreover, He expresses no complaint in saying this. He is the obedient Son who faithfully and diligently fulfills every stipulation that the Father placed upon Him in the eternal covenant of redemption. In that covenant arrangement, He agreed to become incarnate, to take on the form of a man, which means that He took all the qualities that make a human being, human. Therefore, all He knew as a human being, He learned in a process of growth. Central in that process was His submissive and obedient spirit. Thus, He came to know things in a growing way by reading and reflection on one hand, and by God's direct revelation to Him on the other. Consequently, Jesus grew into a full knowledge of Scripture. He knew the Scriptures inside and out in their true spirit

and intent. He grew in marvelous insight into all the logical implications of the things explicitly revealed in Scripture. However, He also knew things that do not come from Scripture either directly or implicitly. For example, He knew that in heaven there is no marriage or giving in marriage, which is not part of OT teaching. How did He know that? He knew it because the Father revealed it to Him and He taught it to us because that is what the Father commanded Him to do. In the following passages, consider how our Lord expresses His sense of obligation to the Father with respect to all He knows and teaches.

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure (Jn. 3.34).

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me (Jn. 5.30).

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment- what to say and what to speak...What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me (Jn. 12.49-50).

How can we better understand the words about His “ignorance”?

His ignorance is a case in point of the paradox regarding the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. He is both God and man as one person and in our thinking about Him, we are not to divide the person nor are we to confuse the natures.

A paradox you will recall is an apparent contradiction. We have to deal with a paradox whenever we have two clear biblical truths that seem to contradict each other. Furthermore, with respect to the threads in the fabric of a paradox, interpreters of Scripture tend to pit one of the teachings over against the other and to reject one in favor of the other. We have many testimonies to this tendency in church history. However, instead of ruling one out because of the other, we must submit our logic- our reason and our reasoning selves- to all the threads of truth in the fabric of Scripture. We then acknowledge our inability to explain how it all fits; we each say, “I am ignorant.” We sometimes call this the most humble use of logic. Scripture teaches that Jesus is God and it teaches that Jesus is a man. It accents both in a full sense. He is fully God and fully man. The Westminster Catechisms have some helpful statements on this point:

WSC 21 Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? A. The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, [of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fulness of time, WLC, 36] became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever.

WLC 40 Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be God and man in one person? A. ...that the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person.

Therefore, as God, Jesus has all knowledge (He is omniscient), but as a man, He is not all knowing. In a way beyond our comprehension, He (the one person) experiences both omniscience and ignorance fully and truly.

Indeed, as a man He grows in knowledge. He advances in wisdom; He learns the ins and outs of obedience (Heb. 5.8-9, **“Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him**). Just as we hold the teaching that He is both God and man truly, fully, and without contradiction, likewise, we must believe that He knows all things as God (and never ceased knowing all things) at the same time that we believe that there are things that He does not know. He does not know in terms of the reality of His humanity. He so added human nature to His eternal being as God that in terms of His humanity, He experienced the reality of being ignorant of many things as a youth, of growing in knowledge as He matured, and of remaining ignorant of the time of His coming.

He adds mention of His own ignorance to the ignorance of men and angels. Why does He do this? What is the connection of these words to the point He is making in the context? He accents the fact that we do not know, and must be content in not knowing, the day or hour of His return. He tells us this point in humble recognition of His ignorance; He does so to teach us about our not knowing as He presents Himself an example of one who is content with what the Father gives and withholds from human understanding.

2A. What we *do* know regarding the time of His coming

The rest of the passage teaches us that we are to know three things about the time of His return: it is imminent, good news, and certain.

1B. His coming is imminent

All the preconditions to His return are in place. All the signs are present pointing to the glad day. The illustration from the created order shows us that His coming will follow these signs just as summer follows the appearance of tender branches and sprouting leaves.

³² "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. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates (Mat.24.32-33).

From the signs, we can see that His coming is near, even at the gates. With similar language, James calls for patience as another side of the coin of imminence:

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door (James 5.7-9).

The time of His coming is imminent: He is at the gates to the city ready to enter at any moment. There is a picture here of a traveler that has traveled long and far; now he has arrived at the very gates ready to open them at any time. We wait looking at the gates watching for His entrance.

2B. His coming is good news

Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (Mat. 24.34).

We know from the context that "this generation" (Mat. 24.34) refers to the Jewish nation blended with the nations in unbelief. Jesus gives us a metaphorical/prophetic vision in which His contemporaries come under the judgment to exist no longer as the people of God for the rest of history to the end of the age. Both Jews and Gentiles are "not my people."

The point Jesus makes is that it is certain that these things will come upon all covenant breakers in the time that flows from His resurrection to His return, with Israelites on the same level as the nations. The new status is evident from the fact that "your house" (temple, city, land, and thus people) is become a desolation (**Mat. 23:38, See, your house is left to you desolate**). In other words, the glory of the Lord departed and the name of this people is Ichabod (1 Sam. 4.21). In the picture our Lord paints, the contemporaries of Jesus live on in unbelief until the second coming of Christ to receive judgment. They do so as "not my people" because this time between is the time of the Gentiles. God mashes Israel into the nations so that Jew and Gentile become one pot of mashed potatoes until the end of the world.

However, one of the signs He mentions is that gospel preaching will extend to all nations before the end can come (24.14). Matthew 10.23 teaches that the cities of Israel become the cities of the earth where the apostles preach until the Son of Man comes. Therefore, when the Lord draws out scoops of mashed potatoes from the single international pot, He saves both Jews and Gentiles, both who are not my people, and both who are in effect (metaphorically) Gentiles or undifferentiated nations. All nations are on an equal plane in condemnation and all receive salvation in the same way, by faith (cf. Rom. 11.32).

Therefore, when He comes He will send His angels with a trumpet call to gather His elect from the four corners of the earth. This means that He will complete the work of building His church in the time between. In the vision, He calls out His church from the nations during the lifetime of the contemporary generation. Thus, the trumpet call indicates the effectual gospel call that summons sinners from all nations; the final call of the trumpet signifies the saving call that culminates at the return of Christ. Accordingly, we know that the time of His coming is good news as the saving of the church reaches completion.

3B. His coming is certain

At first the words of 24.35 seem disconnected in the flow of thought (**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away**), but there is no new subject here. He gives an argument with missing parts that we can fill in by careful reflection. Thus, if we fill it out, we get something to this effect about His imminent coming that is good news:

Implicit Premise: My imminent coming that is good news is my promise

Explicit Premise: My promise is certain

Implicit Conclusion: Therefore, my imminent coming that is good news is certain
 Jesus affirms the absolute dependability of His words. He makes His point in a profoundly simple way. It is all the more astounding when you think of Jesus as the incarnate Son.

The words of this *man*, like none other, have an abiding quality that will outlast the very heavens and the earth in their present form this side of the consummation. The moon will wax old and God will roll up the heavens like an old scroll for discarding into the fire (Heb. 1.10-12; 2 Pet. 3.7-14). It is hard to conceive, but the end of the world (cursed by man's fall) stands out in front of us in the fast approaching future. The future of heaven and earth is fragile and frail indeed, but when the universe as we know it comes to ashes, the words of Christ will abide firm and true. In other words, everything He says is true, dependable, and sure; He will keep all His promises with inevitable and unbreakable certainty.

On the basis of His sure and unbreakable promises, the signs of His coming are reminders that surround us and that point to the reality and certainty of His coming according to God's sovereign plan and control of human history. His imminent coming that is good news is certain.

Concluding implications and applications

1) What is a lesson you can learn here in consideration of our Lord?

You learn about His humility. This calls you to humble yourself, your reasoning self (your selves in all you are as rational beings) before Him because no one can know Him in the full depths of His being except God all knowing.

Strikingly, while He knows the Father in the full depth of all that makes God divine, He does not know the day or hour of His appearing. That knowledge belongs to the Father alone.

Jesus is content with that fact; He submits to the Father's will in perfect covenant obedience. Consider His submissive and obedient spirit. Consider how determined He was to accomplish His mission. He was amazingly unselfish and self-sacrificing for us, for you and for me.

This calls you to humble yourselves before the triune God of love, grace, and mercy that comes to you through His humility in assuming a human nature on your behalf. He did this to become a sacrifice as the high priest of your souls *par excellence*. He took true humanity and ignorance to Himself as His real experience for you—that you may know God in truth (have true knowledge) and come to know Him better and better over the course of your life.

Many things in Scripture are difficult to get a handle on in the mind as we try to work from grasping to applying. An example is the paradox before us in this very text on the knowing and not knowing of Christ. Our reasoning has to adjust to the things revealed; this takes submission that may be uncomfortable at first; there must be training in godly thinking for godly living.

2) What lesson can you learn from these words in their context?

In the end, you must return to the fact that you do not know, cannot know, and must be content in not knowing, the day or hour of His return. You must have patience at the same time that you wait expectantly. You must patiently await His return in light of the fundamental fact of delay. Nevertheless, you are to raise your heads in anticipation and expectation knowing that your redemption is coming soon.

It is a warning to firmly avoid trying to pin a date regarding the time of His coming. With amazing audacity, date setters claim to know what Christ tells us He does not know!

You must live in the knowledge that His return could take place today; this could be the glad day, but it may not be today. You do not know what only God the Father knows: the very moment in history when the Son will appear on the clouds with great glory.

Bow in humble submission to Him. Present yourself, your reasoning self to the Lord in humble submission to His words, which stand like a rock. His words will never pass away.

Be content in not knowing. This is an important aspect of submission. Submit to His word and to His will. He was content with what He did not know. You are to have this outlook too. This outlook balances the need to strive forward in your learning as disciples.

You will come upon things that are difficult to absorb. Thus, as you strive for growth in godliness in both your thinking and doing, you are to be content with what the Lord is teaching you and with what He withholds for the time being. You are to live based on what you now know prayerfully waiting for the Lord to show you more at the next turn in the road (cf. Phil. 3.15-16). This need to strive for growth goes with the fundamental fact that your sanctification is a process.

3) How do His words ground your hope so that you love His appearing?

He promises His coming; then, in effect, He adds an oath to His promise by stating the absolute dependability of His promise. Thus, you have two unchangeable things to ground your confidence and hope. Note how the writer to the Hebrews expressed this point:

¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. ¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6.11-20)

In the end, you have an additional perspective on entry into Sabbath rest. You do not only have hope as you look ahead to the day of your death, but you have hope every day. Each morning you can wake up and sing: "O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day" because "everything is going my way" because this may be the day, the glad day "when I shall see my friend and trials and sorrows will end."

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble recognition of our sins; may the Holy Spirit enable us to set our minds on the Lord Jesus and to love His appearing; may we turn away from all earthly things, from every earthly thing in order to love Him and serve Him in everything. To Him be all glory both now and forevermore, amen.