

When Jesus Comes to Meet Us

Our New Testament reading is Luke 12:35-48. Jesus used what is known as apocalyptic symbolism to describe his glorious Second Coming, which will bring judgment for unbelievers and consummated salvation for his followers. He used parables and images to teach the importance of living in readiness and responsibility when he comes to meet us. The picture Jesus paints in our scripture is of a Roman household, with a master who has given assignments to his servants and then returns to call them to account for their faithfulness in carrying out their duties in his absence.

Follow as I read **Luke 12:35-48**:

³⁵ *“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.*

³⁹ *“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”*

⁴¹ *Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?”⁴² And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? ⁴³ Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. ⁴⁴ Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. ⁴⁷ That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.*

No subject has more interest for the typical believer than the Second Coming of Christ. Theories abound as to the nature and dating of Jesus’ return, even though Jesus warns us against speculating over these specifics (Mk 13:32-33; Acts 1:6-8). The most popular interpretation of Jesus’ return (and the one that gave rise to best-selling novels) is the one of a pre-tribulation and secret rapture of the church. Naturally we would all like to think that before the worst suffering and tribulation starts we’ll be raptured away from it all. Unfortunately for many of our brothers and sisters in Christ there has been no rapture from their suffering,

and this very day are experiencing great tribulation and possible martyrdom for their stand for Christ.

Clearly the Scriptures teach that there indeed will be a glorious return of Christ that will signal the end of human history and this fallen world order as we know it. History is linear, it is going someplace. So, by that very fact we know that the Second Coming of Christ is closer than it's ever been; in fact, 2,000 years closer than when Jesus told his followers to live in vigilance for his return. Peter wrote his second letter to counter the scoffing of those who asked cynically, "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). The scoffers said that nothing had happened to show that Jesus would keep his promise of his return. But then Peter reminds the scoffers that God is eternal and outside of time, which makes a thousand years like a day and a day like a thousand years. On his predetermined day he'll end history as we know it (2 Pet. 3:8-10).

In his teaching on his glorious return, Jesus says that there will be signs that will show the imminence of his return so that those living in readiness need not be taken by surprise (Lk. 17:25). The teaching of Scripture is that only those oblivious to God's word and warnings will be taken by surprise when Jesus returns. We who follow Christ are to not be taken by surprise but are to live in the readiness that Jesus describes in our text.

We're to live with an alert eye for evidence of our Savior's appearing, not knowing when it will be. Jesus gives the imagery of the managers, workers and domestics in a large household. Some of you men know what it is to live alone while your wives are absent, intending to have the house in order and the dishes washed when the wife returns. If you're a procrastinator you may wait to clean a messy house till the day of night before her return, hoping she doesn't return earlier than expected. Another parallel to today's culture would be the assignments given to a babysitter, to feed the kids, put them to bed and clean up the kitchen. It would be like a babysitter, not wanting to miss her favorite TV program, and calculating the parents return to be much later, only to be unpleasantly surprised by a sooner-than-expected return.

Noah Webster, who compiled his famous dictionary and had an obsession with precise definitions, was caught by his wife while embracing their housemaid in a closet. "Noah!" exclaimed his wife. "I'm *surprised* at you!" "No, my dear, replied Noah, "You are *amazed*. It is *we* who are surprised."

During the 40 days following his resurrection, Jesus made sudden and unexpected appearances to his disciples. In his resurrection body, he was not bound by time and space limitations, and could simply appear, even passing through closed and locked doors. His presence was met, not so much with surprise as with joy, as he assured, taught and gave his disciples final instructions before his ascension back to heaven. Though he's bodily in heaven

with the Father, we can't "locate" heaven, but it's the realm of glory beyond the reach of our present apprehension.

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus "shows up" in special moments of our lives. The Holy Spirit is with us always, but I find that the Lord Jesus, in the words of George Herbert, "plays in ten thousand places." If I'm living in the awareness of his presence I can see his activity around me. When we gather to worship, we should expect the risen Jesus to "show up," to bless and encourage us with his presence. I hope that even today we're expecting Jesus to "show up" and that we're practicing his presence here with us, as he teaches, rebukes, encourages, comforts and directs our lives.

Jesus sets the imagery of this passage in the darkness. Although the world around us is darkness, unbelief, immorality and all sorts of wickedness, we're to live differently, as Paul says, as "children of light and children of the day" (1 Thess. 5:4). Paul must have been thinking about these words of Jesus in our text when he reminds us that the appearing of the Lord should not surprise us "like a thief" in the night. So Paul admonishes us to live in this present darkness as those who are alert, self-controlled and encouraging one another in service and spiritual growth (1 Thess. 5:4-11).

There's the real and dreadful possibility that even we who're children of God may be taken by surprise and experience shame instead of joy when Jesus appears. To live as though we're in darkness would be to be unconfident and ashamed before the Lord "at his coming" (1 Jn. 2:28). If we're not living with transparency before Christ we're in fact living as children of darkness. We must always be aware of his presence and our prayer should be:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24).

So, Jesus says we are to keep our lamps burning, that is, live by the light of his presence. He gives a lovely picture of the return of the master of the household, who does a role reversal. Instead of expecting his servants and caretakers to serve him, he serves them (37), like the time Jesus took a towel and washed his disciples' feet (Jn. 13:2ff). Jesus comes to us as a welcome guest, by his mercy and grace for our salvation. Jesus' "first appearing" brought us new life (Tit. 2:11). But Jesus also continues to come to us in gracious and loving reappearances for our help and encouragement. As Christ says,

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev. 3:20).

Readiness for Jesus' appearing, whether in this life's daily experiences, in our going home in death or Jesus' glorious appearing to end history, calls for a relationship with him as our Friend. True friends are welcome at any time, and Jesus says we are more than his servants—we're his friends if we do what he commands (Jn. 15:12ff). Our goal should be to so walk in loving obedience to Jesus that we're not surprised and certainly not ashamed when he appears and reveals himself, his power and his glory.

We're responsible for the way we manage our lives and how they're lived before God. There's nothing hidden from God. And the fruit that Jesus expects from us is primarily the fruit of the Spirit, the degree to which we become more like Jesus (Matt. 7:15-23; Gal. 5:22-23). To be prepared for the moment when Jesus comes to meet us we must begin right away. The making of a fruitful life takes time. Even if we knew that Jesus were coming for us tomorrow morning, would there be enough time for us to allow the Spirit to make the necessary changes in our lives? The development of character includes patience and perseverance, which require time (Jas. 1:2-3; Rom. 5:3-4).

Jesus speaks about the servant who loses the sense of awareness of his Master's sudden appearing but also his sense of responsibility for others in the household. Jesus describes a reckless, self-indulgent, out of control man who beats up on those under his responsibility (45). In these "last days," it's absolutely imperative that we live with kindness and faithfulness to care for one another. Jesus will hold us accountable for how we treat one another. Because as we care for one another, we care for Christ himself and as we neglect one another, we neglect Christ himself (Matt. 25:31-46).

Jesus gives a picture of servants facing the returned master, who doles out a just punishment to those who failed in their responsibility (46-48). Those who had greater opportunity and were given more responsibility were punished more severely than those who had little opportunity. And just as there will be degrees of reward for God's children, so there will be degrees of punishment according to the opportunities we've had to follow and serve Christ.

When we're living in joyful expectation of the Lord Jesus, we're walking with him in such rich fellowship that our going to heaven or his coming to earth will be almost like a mere transition and not an abrupt interruption. This transition has been described as moving from one room of a house to another, while we maintain the conversation with our Lord and master of "the house." Here Jesus refers to himself as the master of the house who returns to serve his servants!

In what may have been his "swan song," his last "will and testament," Paul speaks of his life as having been completely poured out as a drink offering and the time having come for his departure. As perhaps he hears the guard walking down the corridor and rattling the keys to unlock his prison door, Paul continues, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Then, the Roman guard opens the door and Paul must hastily pen these final words, which were to be followed by some personal words of instruction, while the guard waiting to escort him to his execution there in Rome:

“From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

Paul longed for Jesus’ appearing. He didn’t try to predict the when of it or describe the how of it. He simply knew there would be this joyful meeting with Jesus; and his life was lived in anticipation of it and preparation for it. This is the way we’re to be living and serving when Jesus comes to meet us. We should be easily and readily interruptible when Jesus comes for us. I want to be in a state of readiness when Jesus comes in glory or when he comes for me personally, whichever happens first.

I have good friends as neighbors, who always remind me that when I come for a visit I don’t need to wait till they come to open the door. I should just ring the doorbell and come on in. I’m a friend. So we’ll tell our best Friend Jesus to “just come on in.” We’re ready to receive him.