# Watching for the one who is coming

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Matthew 24:36-44

Matthew chapter 24 is a complicated and difficult section of the scripture to understand. Our gospel lesson gives us a slice of that chapter to look at, and, frankly, it’s a little disorienting to jump right into the middle and know what Jesus is talking about. And we don’t have the minutes or hours or days to look at every thing we might learn. We will just have to do our best with what we have in the time we have allotted. I want to recognize my debt to *The New Bible Commentary*[[1]](#footnote-1) for what I have to say today.

But it helps if we take a quick peek at the beginning of the chapter, which gives us the outline of Jesus’s words. Let’s read verses 1-3:

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Do you see the outline? Jesus predicts that the beautiful Temple, the “place of God’s abode,” and the center of the religious life of his people, was going to be completely destroyed. And then the disciples asks him two questions, which our outline:

1. When will this be? That is, when will the Temple be destroyed?
2. What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

By the way, the word for “coming” in “the sign of your coming” in Greek is *parousia*, and when this was translated into Latin, it became *adventus*, from which we derive our word for this season, Advent. It is totally appropriate that we look at this passage in this season.

In 2013, we can look back and, say, in wonder and astonishment and sadness, that Jesus’s prediction about the Temple was precisely fulfilled: the Romans came in the year 70 — perhaps 40 years in Jesus’s future, but likely after this gospel was written down, and within a generation of Jesus’s prediction — the Romans came, abominably desecrated the Temple, and tore it down, stone by stone, after a seven month siege, as the Jews mourned, even as the new Christian movement was spreading through the known Greco-Roman world proclaiming Jesus as the “Son of Man” and true Messiah whose reign went beyond one people to any and all.

So, that answers the first question — when the Temple would be destroyed. It appears that the second question — what would signal Jesus’s coming and the end of the age — begins to be answered in verse 36:

36“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Jesus frankly acknowledges that he doesn’t know when he would be back. Interestingly, it doesn’t take much math to realize that it wouldn’t take place until the destruction of the Temple. But Jesus emphasizes that it will come as a surprise — as surprising as the sudden floods that overcame people during the times of Noah. People will be going about their business, tending their fields or preparing their daily food. The crucial thing, and something Jesus emphasizes over and over again in this and the following passages, is to *be watching*.

For those early believers, they were to be watching for two things. The first was the coming war with the Romans and the destruction of the Temple. Since this has now already happened, we don’t need to join them in watching for *that*. But they, and we, are to be watching for his coming and the end of the age.

How are we to do that? We are told explicitly one thing that are *not* to do: try to figure out when it is to happen:

42Keep awake therefore, **(one)** for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But **(two)** understand this: if the owner 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. 44Therefore you also must be ready, **(three)** for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. [[4]](#footnote-4)

If Jesus says something three times, we should pay attention!

Unfortunately, with just our lectionary passage today, we don’t get any positive information about what good watching looks like. Fortunately, Jesus goes on to tell us in some detail in the next several parables about what he expects. Of course, we won’t have time to look at these in any detail, but here’s a whirlwind:

1. Like a faithful manager, we are to *watch for* things to do for the Lord with what the Lord has given use. We are also to *watch out* that we don’t misuse any of those resources.
2. Like wise bridesmaids, we are to *prevent* ourselves from being ready to celebrate when the Lord returns.
3. Like a wise steward, we are to *watch for* opportunities to increase our Lord’s reign, and to *watch out* that we don’t hang back in shame.
4. We are to faithfully *watch for* Jesus in the disguise of those who need a welcome, who are hungry, who need clothing, and who are in prison. We are to *watch out* that miss all of these opportunities to see Jesus in those around us.

I’d like to note that all this watching is not something we can do successfully as individuals — we’re going to have to do it together.

As we end the secular year, and as we begin the new Christian year, I invite you to think on these parables, and the call of Christ to watch for opportunities to declare and extend his reign. Is there something new that you can do in the month of December?

1. *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition*. 1994 (D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer & G. J. Wenham, Ed.) (4th ed.) (935). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 24:1–3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 24:36). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 24:42–44). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)