

²⁶Then you will see the Son of Man coming on clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷At that time he will send out his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of the sky.

²⁸“Learn from this illustration of the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also when you see these things happening, you will know that he is near—at the doors! ³⁰Amen I tell you: This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things happen. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³²“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Watch! Be alert and pray, because you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going away on a journey. When he left his home, he put his servants in charge and assigned what each one was to do. He also commanded the doorkeeper to keep watch. ³⁵Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house is coming: whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. ³⁶If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷What I say to you, I say to everyone: Keep watch!”

Today marks the conclusion of the church year. Like every year, we’ve waited for Jesus’ first coming and celebrated it on Christmas. We’ve seen Jesus as the Savior the world needs during the season of Epiphany. We’ve walked with Jesus on his path to the cross in Lent, noticing again and again that it is our sin he came to remove. And we’ve rejoiced with all believers at his resurrection. For the last half of the church year, we’ve spent time thinking about Jesus’ words and teachings. If you want to dig into it more, our Thanksgiving service this upcoming week is all about how we give thanks to God in every season of the church year. With all things now in order, Jesus prepares us for the end, for his second coming. He instructs us to keep our eyes on the skies, excited for what’s to come, watching and waiting for the Lord, and always prepared for when this day comes.

Now, the scriptures don’t give a thorough explanation of what awaits, but we see plenty of glances. Jesus will come down from heaven in power and glory. And this will be very different than his coming on Christmas. He will not be hidden in a remote village but displayed to the entire world at once. He will not come as a helpless babe, but as the glorious and radiant Lord. When he comes, he will send his holy angels to gather the elect, those chosen from eternity who belong to God. The angels will come find us, even if our bodies lie in dust and ashes, to return them to the God who so lovingly gave them.

We see all this incredible imagery of what is to come, but our human minds tend to underestimate it. I’m sure you’ve seen incredible displays before. You’ve watched firework shows, where hundreds of explosions fill the air in front of you. You’ve probably gathered in a stadium or fieldhouse with thousands of people as athletes showed the crowd the reason they are paid so highly, playing whatever sport it was at a higher level than you have ever known. You maybe have been to a concert, maybe even one of those concerts where they pack in hundreds of thousands of people to take in the sights and lift their voices with the artist on stage.

You’ve seen a lot of power and glory before, maybe even from up close. But those sights and sounds and feelings only stick around for a while. Sure, you might have pictures. You certainly have memories. But you can’t reexperience what you saw and what you felt. It’s just a flash of glory, then back to reality.

But what’s to come will not just be a night to remember. It will be an experience that never stops. Whether still alive or having fallen asleep, our bodies will be raised and perfected. Just as the prophet Job said, we will see our God face-to-face, which now seems impossible and fear-inspiring, but on that day will be what brings us

joy and peace forever. Our eternal home will be in heaven, the place where the glory of Christ touches everything.

This promise is ours today, but it doesn't mean that we can see it with our own eyes yet. So, when will this day come? This is the question that many people ask, people who are struggling with the loneliness of feeling cooped up at home all the time, people who are frustrated by the chronic aches and pains that plague their lives, people who are just tired of the struggle and long to go home. Jesus gives us an answer, but it's probably not the answer any of us find all that much contentment in on the surface.

He says, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Watch! Be alert and pray, because you do not know when the time will come." No one but the Father knows when that day will come. Not those who study the Bible a lot. Not even the Son. And this leads us to do one of two things. First, we might try and predict his coming. You've probably heard stories of religious groups that sifted through the Bible and came to the conclusion that the end would come on such and such a day. But each time someone has tried to guess, they've been wrong. Why? Because Jesus tells us here that no one know the day or the hour. Second, if we can't predict it, we might try and push it to the backburner and forget about it. Maybe we do this because we've been caught waiting for a promise that never materialized in the past. Maybe we do it because we've got a mindset of procrastination, especially about the unseen matters of eternity.

Jesus does not say when this is going to happen, but he does tell us what to look for. Just before this Jesus says there will be wars and rumors of war in the End Times. There will also be a number of natural disasters. People will hate each other, and the love of most people will grow cold toward other people. In the parallel account from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that people will be living normal lives when the time comes.

Now, maybe you say: "That's a picture of what's going on right now. These are the kinds of things that litter a news report." You're right. We hear of wars that are ongoing and wars that might break out. Not long ago, two hurricanes decimated the southeastern part of our country. And people being cold to each other? I know that many of you have it going on in your own families because you've shared it with me.

When will Jesus come? He tells us a few times that he's coming soon. But what are we talking about? Weeks? Decades? Millenia? "No one knows about that day or hour." The Christians that came before us in the post-World War II Cold War era feared that the end was soon. There were always rumors that nuclear war was on the horizon. Christ would certainly come then, many thought. But he didn't. They were not the first with this idea, though. In 1917, our country was thrust into the "War to End All Wars." All corners of the earth were involved, and many believers thought this was the time for Jesus to come bring us home. But Judgement Day didn't come. Go back to the decades after Jesus' ascension into heaven. These believers knew all these words from Jesus. Some of them had heard them come from Jesus' mouth and recorded them with the divine inspiration of the Spirit. Did they look at the world around them, the persecutions of believers and the hatred of many, and think Jesus would come in their lifetime?

It seems every generation has this issue. As they grow older and more aware of the goings on of the world around them, they see all these things Jesus warns us about. And they become convinced that Jesus is coming soon. So, they live as if Jesus is coming soon. And isn't that the reason Jesus says these things? Isn't he calling us to be constantly ready for his return? Isn't he warning us so that we don't fall into that procrastinating mindset, that mindset that tells us we can get right with Jesus tomorrow? We are not promised tomorrow. We are only promised that he is coming soon.

The excitement for Jesus' coming and our understanding that the day is coming soon leads us to take action. It leads us to prepare. Jesus uses two pictures that show how we are to stay prepared. In the first, he says:

“Learn from this illustration of the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near.” When you see the trees begin to sprout, you know that winter is coming to a close and spring has arrived. That leads you to take action. You start planning your garden and checking over the lawnmower to make sure it runs. You change out your wardrobe and cautiously begin packing the winter clothes away for the year and breaking out your summer clothes.

In the same way, when we see those reminders of the end, we ought to prepare ourselves. We ought not live to pile up the things of this world. We ought to focus on the things of eternal glory. We ought not fixate on how we can help our kids get ahead in life, but how we lead them to live as lights of the gospel in the world. When we remember what’s coming, we prioritize differently. And that’s the reason Jesus says these things.

In the second picture, Jesus says: “It is like a man going away on a journey. When he left his home, he put his servants in charge and assigned what each one was to do. He also commanded the doorkeeper to keep watch. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house is coming: whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.” This illustration reminds me of the many TV shows I grew up with that had an episode where the parents went away, the kids had a party, and the parents returned before the kids had time to clean up.

We can make our lives a mess. We can live that life that tells ourselves we’ll be right with God someday. There’s just too much that the world is offering right now, too many things that make us really happy. But Jesus will come back, and when he does, what will we be doing? Not everyone is always so blessed as to know they are dying ahead of time. People die in accidents. Heart attacks strike when least expected. The end of our days is coming, whether soon or later, whether in death or in the Last Day.

But Jesus tells us to keep watch, to keep our eyes fixed on the skies as we await the return of our Savior from sin. In him we have forgiveness. In him heaven is ours. Amen.