

The Parable of the Days of Noah
Matthew 24:36-41
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 24-25 addresses events related to the sign of His coming and the end of the age. Jesus listed several signs in Matthew 24:4-28 that describe the seven-year period of tribulation upon the earth before His second coming. This will be a time *“such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.”* These days of tribulation will conclude with the second coming of Christ, and with His kingdom (Matthew 24:29-31).

The remainder of Matthew 24 illustrates the importance of being watchful for this return of Jesus. He provided a series of parables, which serve to teach the need to be vigilant and alert in the light of His coming. His return is certain and should be anticipated. The parable of the fig tree shows those living at the time of this tribulation will be able to observe the signs of His coming, just as they can observe the signs of Spring, meaning that figs will be coming soon.

Jesus’ second parable in this section, which is the parable of the days of Noah, shows that in spite of the turmoil of the tribulation period, and in spite of Jesus’ warnings of what these signs of His near return are, the people of this generation continue with their lives as before, unaware of His coming. This will lead to further exhortations by Jesus regarding the need for alertness.

No one knows the day and the hour (24:36)

Jesus followed His teaching of *“when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door”* with *“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”* These may seem to be two inconsistent statements, as He indicates there is an ability to recognize His nearness but no one but the Father knows the time of His return.

The phrase “day and hour” refers to a general period of time in its usage in the Gospels (cf. Matthew 7:22; 10:19; 26:45). This general time of Christ’s return is unknowable, but the signs do show His return is near. His coming can be close without being precisely knowable. This may imply that there will not be a clear indication of when the start of the seven-year tribulation period will be, for simple math could then determine when Christ would return if this knowledge was able to be ascertained.

This also may imply that the rapture of the church does not immediately trigger the tribulation period, for again, this would then make the knowledge of Christ's return knowable. There is no direct biblical reference that teaches the tribulation period must immediately follow the rapture of the church. This is assumed by many, but is not stated anywhere in Scripture.

Another difficulty that arises from Matthew 24:36 is Jesus' statement that He does not know when the day and hour of His return will be. This has led many to become concerned that Jesus' limitation of His knowledge is in conflict with His deity. We can find this concern among the church fathers, some of whom, such as Athanasius and Augustine, viewed Jesus as actually knowing but not willing to reveal it to the disciples.

The text of Matthew 24:36 shows this issue arose in the transmission of the Greek text, as the oldest manuscripts have the phrase "*nor the Son,*" but the newer manuscripts eliminated it. One of the oldest manuscripts, Codex Sinaiticus, has "*nor the Son*" but is later edited out, only to be later still added again. This textual challenge in Matthew 24:36 resulted in the King James Version reading, "*But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only*" since only later manuscripts were available to its translators.

We know that Jesus said that He did not know what the day and hour of His return based upon Mark 13:32, "*But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone*" This verse in Mark's Gospel does not have any textual ambiguity. Furthermore, the nature of the word "*alone*" in the phrase "*but the Father alone*" almost demands that the phrase "*nor the Son*" precedes it in order for the following phrase to be more comprehensible. It is clear what Jesus said and the only challenge lies with our understanding.

How is it possible for Jesus to be God and not know everything, including when He will return? The answer lies in the nature of the incarnation of Christ, where He, as God, became man, and dwelt among us. Our Lord voluntarily limited Himself, and this limitation included not only His omnipresence but also His omniscience, including the knowledge of the timing of His return (cf. Luke 2:52; Philippians 2:5-8). Jesus chose to forsake some of His divine attributes during His life. He endured the same difficulties as man endures, including being hungry (cf. Matthew 4:2, 21:18) and tired (John 4:6). This is part of the Hypostatic Union, as Christ was fully man and fully God. This theological premise was an important part of the Nicene Creed (325 AD) and the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which opposed the view that limited His humanity or His deity.

Some will be unprepared for the day and the hour (24:37-39)

Jesus followed the statement that no one knows the day and hour of His return with the explanation of the response of the generation that will experience these events. The people at the time of the coming of the Lord will be going about their lives consumed with their own affairs, completely caught off guard by the return of Jesus.

Jesus makes the point that this will parallel the days of Noah, where the people of earth in Noah's day disregarded God's revelation to Noah about the coming flood and remained unprepared. Earlier, when Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for the final time, He had told His disciples this same point, *"And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed"* (Luke 17:26-30).

While the human race at the time of Noah was taken away in judgment, except for the *"eight persons, who were brought safely through the water"* (1 Peter 3:20), their actions were not specifically sinful. This is likewise with the example of Lot. Eating, drinking, marrying, being given in marriage, buying, selling, planting and building, are not intrinsically evil. They are normal practices of everyday life. Indeed, they are to some degree noble. Yet in each case, there was something far more important at hand. To be so absorbed with everyday pursuits can lead to completely missing the warnings of God.

It may appear remarkable that in spite of a time where *"there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will"* (Matthew 24:21), people will continue to function as they always have. Yet this is the fallen nature of man. We are aware of the danger of earthquakes in Southern California, but after years pass from the last large earthquake, we become complacent. People have continued to build homes in places where wildfires and mudslides are common. The sense of false security is as normal today as it was in the days of Noah, and this will be the case in the time of Christ's second coming. This is the very reason why the Lord told and Matthew recorded such a number of parables in the Olivet Discourse about the need for continued alertness.

Some will be taken and some will be left on the day and the hour (24:40-41)

Jesus made it clear that His return would bring both the kingdom of God for the elect (24:31) and judgment upon the evildoers who will be taken away (24:39). This will become even more clear in Matthew 25:31-46, in the judgment of the sheep and the goats. There will be a final separation of the believers and the unbelievers, for all of eternity.

The two men in the field represent those who are working in the cultivating of a crop, as farmers, and the two women grinding at the mill represent the task of pulverizing grain into flour by manually turning a stone. This task would normally be done by two women, as it was necessary for each to be opposite one another in order to turn the stone adequately. The point of these words is the abruptness of the separation of people working closely together at the return of Christ.

This imagery ought not to be confused with the rapture of the church. At the rapture, those who are taken are those who will always be with the Lord, not the unbelievers who are left. *“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord”* (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

While Matthew 24:40-41 does not specify which one is the believer and which one is the unbeliever, the comparison with the days of Noah provides the understanding, since *“the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah”* (Matthew 24:37). In the days of Noah, those who were taken were the unbelievers, who were destroyed by the flood. Those who remained upon the earth after the flood were the believers, namely Noah and his family.

This fits with the second coming which leaves the faithful welcomed into the kingdom of God when the Lord comes to reign. The King will say to the sheep, *“Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”* (Matthew 25:34). In contrast to the faithful, the unbelievers are taken away, *“Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels”* (Matthew 25:41).

The point of the parable of the days of Noah is that the suddenness of Christ's return will bring an immediate eternal separation between the faithful and the unfaithful. Because only the Father knows the day and hour of the return of Christ in the kingdom of God, the abruptness of the coming judgment will be as unexpected as the flood was in the days of Noah. This demands the need to *“be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming”* (Matthew 24:42).