

**A Thief in the Night**  
**Mathew 24:36-44, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Acts 1: 6-8**

Friends, do you remember what it was like when your teacher left the classroom? Usually she would say something like – Class - I need to run down to the office for a few minutes so I want you all to sit quietly and work on your assignments!

And then she would leave...and almost immediately kids would take out a favorite library book they wanted to read instead, or some food to eat, the girls would turn around in their seats to start talking to one another and passing notes, the guys would start picking on each other and the spitballs and paper airplanes would fly...

we would pretty much do anything but - sit quietly and work on the assignment – right?

However we weren't foolish... so someone was always posted at the classroom door as a lookout. To warn us when the teacher was coming back, and when they sounded the alarm – “she's coming! She's coming!” there would be a mad scramble

as everyone returned to their seats and tried to look as if they'd been working studiously on the assignment.

Of course sometimes the lookout would sound the alarm just for fun – after all they were stuck watching for the teacher and they couldn't join in the mayhem, so they would get their kicks by giving a false alarm and watching everyone scramble in panic.

But if they did this too many times, when the teacher really was coming nobody would pay any attention to them – a classic example of the boy who cried wolf...or teacher in this case, and when the teacher came back in the classroom to find us all fooling around and goofing off – boy were we in trouble!

And then we would all be angry and upset with the lookout for getting us in trouble, but in reality it was our fault for goofing off and not doing what the teacher had instructed us to do, right?

And friends when people make predictions about judgment day and Christ's return it can have the same kind of effect.

At first it might spook us, cause us to do a bit of a mad scramble to get everything in order for Christ's return, but once the predicted date comes and goes and we see that it was just a false alarm, well... we feel annoyed at the person who sounded the alarm, we're relieved that we can get back to what we were doing before, and we're less inclined to believe the next person who makes such a prediction.

And there have been plenty of these kinds of predictions in the two thousand years since Christ ascended to heaven,

- Emmanuel Swedenborg claimed that Christ would return in the year 1757,
- George Rapp predicted it would happen on September 15, 1829,
- William Miller picked Oct 22, 1844
- Charles Taze Russell, first president of the Watchtower Society predicted 1874
- Herbert W. Armstrong was fairly certain that it would be in 1975
- Bill Maupin set the date at June 28, 1981
- Benjamin Crème said "no it's about a year later June 21, 1982"

- Even Nostradamus' crazy visions have been read as predicting 1999

You'd think people would have learned by now but no...

There's still

- Paul Sides – Sept 13, 2007,
- Mark Biltz – Sept 30, 2008
- And of course most recently Harold Camping – who is now on his fourth prediction of October 21, 2011 having previously selected May 21, 1988, September 7, 1994, and May 21, 2011

And not everyone feels these people are correct because Jack VanImpe thinks it will happen sometime in 2012, and Troy Brooks says no, it will be in 2022.

So, friends, how do you feel when you hear someone sound the alarm that Christ is coming back? Annoyed, angry, indifferent, or uncertain perhaps?

Well friends, I know that as a result of all these false alarms many people feel that Christ will not return – they don't believe he's coming back at all!

They no longer feel any sense of expectation, urgency or anxiety about when the teacher might be coming back into the room so that they'd better be doing what they were instructed to do when the teacher left. Maybe that's the case for us as well?

And while I can't excuse any of these people for predicting the date of Christ's return since the bible is so explicitly clear that no one knows this date – not even Jesus or any of the angels...and we read three passages from scripture this morning which state this!...

perhaps some of these people were simply trying to motivate the people of their generation to get their priorities straight in life, to cause people to feel anticipation and expectation that God has almost finished His plan to make this world a new place!

because if we knew the day that Christ would return to evaluate us, settle accounts with us and set things right...well our nerves probably wouldn't settle down until we'd straightened things out in preparation for that visit, right?

If we knew that the new heavens and new earth, the Kingdom of God would be established on a particular date – then we wouldn't be so consumed by the here and now, we'd be looking forward, planning and preparing...

This is why Jesus says “if the owner of the house knew the time the thief was coming he would have kept watch and not let his house be broken into” (vs. 43)

You see, while we may and should criticize these people for doing something the scripture blatantly says not to do, we must remember they are only in error for trying to predict a date and time – they have not erred in being convinced that Christ will return and bring judgment with him.

So Friends, what God wants to say to us through these scripture passages this morning is that in spite of the fact that many false

alarms have been sounded, we mustn't stop being prepared or expecting Christ's return and the judgment that accompanies it.

We are instructed to "keep watch" and "be ready" because the judgment will come when you do not expect it.

Jesus says, life will be going on as normal when he will return. People will be making plans for their lives, for their future – getting engaged, getting married...

They will be going about their daily lives, feeling comfortable and familiar in their firm routine of work and sleep and coffee, working in the fields and in the kitchen....and then suddenly its judgment day, without warning.

And if we are not ready for it...well, the one working in the field who wasn't prepared is taken in judgment; the one working in the kitchen who wasn't prepared is taken in judgment – but the ones who were prepared survive, they remain after the judgment is over.

So...how are you feeling now? Like you've just had a bucket of cold water thrown on you to keep you from dozing off, to bring you back to your senses?

Because that's the temptation isn't it... we can become sleepy, drowsy, hazy or slightly buzzed, distracted by the partying that goes on around us while the teacher is out of the room.

We are tempted to join in the mayhem that's going on while the teacher is away.

And sometimes it truly is mayhem – a wild party lifestyle, sex drugs and rock'n'roll,

And other times it's the comfortably numb security of a good job, a good family and a good retirement package.

Either way, we are tempted to feel that we can neglect what the teacher instructed us to do when He left the room. We'll get around to the assignment eventually...look at how many times people thought Jesus was coming back – and he's still not here. We have some time, right?

Well friends – we really don't know if we do or if we don't, do we?

But we of all people should not be surprised at the return of Christ – because as the Apostle Paul puts it – we are children of the light, children of the day. We are sober, prepared, confident, alert... especially after having a bucket of cold water thrown on us!

So does this mean we need to be in church all the time, praying and reading the bible all the time, giving away all of our belongings to charity...feeling like we shouldn't have any attachments to this life and this world?

No, Jesus example in vs. 40 shows that people are not judged because they are in the field or the kitchen instead of praying or doing “spiritual” things...

Instead being prepared for the return of Christ means three things – first it means that we are aware that the question we will face on judgment day is “have we always been a 100%

faithful covenant partner to your creator? (Which is not the same as have you been a good person and tried hard in life?)”

So in other words...

We've always worshipped God and God alone,  
we've never had an idol in our life,  
we've always had a pure heart,  
never once wanting to disobey God's commands  
we've always thanked God for everything,  
never ever taken Him for granted...

You get the picture... and I know there is no way I can say yes I've always been a 100% faithful covenant partner, and friends know that you can't either, judgment day is only going to confirm this for us officially.

So then, the second aspect of being prepared for Christ's return means that since we are aware of our deficiency we look to Him to make up for it. Jesus Christ was the perfect, 100%, all-time faithful covenant partner with God and he is available as our substitute on judgment day.

So when the question is put to us, we answer honestly saying – no, I haven't been a 100% faithful covenant partner to you God, forgive me - but I believe Jesus was and I trust in him as my substitute.

Friends this faith we have in Christ's love is our protection against judgment. And as Paul says in 1 Thess 5: 8 it guards our heart as a breastplate from being fatally stabbed by despair, guilt, or self-condemnation.

The hope we have in Christ as our substitute protects our faith like a helmet from the crushing blows of disaster and tragedy in this life.

It's easy to doubt, and the devil willingly pitches in to help us wonder if we are suffering because it feels like God hates us, life feels like God wants to punish us for something, or crush us because we are too happy...

Friends those thoughts and feelings are false! It is Christ's substitution for us as a covenant partner which assures us God is not against us in this life or at Christ's return – he is for us. 1

Thes 5:9 says *“God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”*

So friends, in light of all this – the third aspect of being prepared for Christ's return involves doing what Christ told us to do when he ascended to heaven.

Jesus in Acts 1:8 says we are to be His witnesses, and if you think about it, witnesses are people who give testimony.

We do this in our words as 1 Thes 5:11 says we must encourage each other – so we need to speak to each other and remind ourselves of who we are and what Christ has done for us, that He will return, and that we do not fear judgment.

Instead we are grateful, confident, expectant and full of hope

And because of what we believe, our actions – like the ones Jesus describes in Matt 24, speak louder than our words as witnesses.

We make our plans for the future, we sow seeds, and we harvest and go about our daily routines because we fully trust

and believe Christ's return will bring about the renewal of our world – we know our future is secure.

And these actions may be earthly and ordinary... they are very spiritual friends – because they are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 1:8 Christ said he would send the Spirit to us to empower us as his witnesses sent to us. It is the Spirit gives us the ability to encourage through our words, and to show courage through putting our faith into actions.

So how do you feel now friends, Encouraged I hope, grateful for Christ as our substitute, relieved that we do not need to fear judgment, eager and expectant to see Christ return – and the kingdom of God come in its fullness with in our lifetime perhaps... but if not we are confident we will go to be with him anyway!

So friends, let us live then as children of the light, sober and alert, so that we are not distracted by the mayhem and chaos going on around in the classroom and so that we are ready

when the trumpet sounds to let us know – Christ is coming!  
Christ is coming! Amen.