

## LESSON ELEVEN

# THE LAST DAYS

*Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man  
is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

MATTHEW 24:44 NKJV

## REFLECTION

Few subjects are as hotly debated among Christians as the subject of the “end times.” Believers argue such questions as, *When will Christ return? What will be the sequence of events? What is Armageddon?* What is your current understanding of the last days?

## SITUATION

During the final week before Jesus’ crucifixion, he gathered his disciples and talked frankly to them about his second coming. Speaking from the Mount of Olives—where the prophet Zechariah had revealed the Messiah would stand when he comes again to establish his kingdom—he urged his followers to be ready for his return and to be faithful to the end.

## OBSERVATION

*Read Matthew 24:32–51 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.*

## NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

<sup>32</sup> “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. <sup>34</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

<sup>36</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

<sup>42</sup> “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

<sup>45</sup> “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? <sup>46</sup> It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. <sup>47</sup> Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. <sup>48</sup> But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ <sup>49</sup> and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. <sup>50</sup> The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. <sup>51</sup> He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

## NEW KING JAMES VERSION

<sup>32</sup> “Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors! <sup>34</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

<sup>36</sup> “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. <sup>37</sup> But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>38</sup> For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. <sup>40</sup> Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. <sup>42</sup> Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

<sup>45</sup> “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? <sup>46</sup> Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. <sup>47</sup> Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. <sup>48</sup> But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ <sup>49</sup> and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, <sup>50</sup> the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, <sup>51</sup> and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

## EXPLORATION

**1.** What particular lesson from the fig tree did Jesus want his disciples to understand?

**2.** What did Jesus say about the timing of his return?

**3.** What was Jesus’ point in bringing up the story of Noah?

**4.** Why did Jesus say his followers needed to watch for his return?

**5.** What is the point of Jesus’ story about the faithful and wise servants?

**6.** What stern warning did Jesus give at the end of this parable to those who want to live as though he will never return?

## INSPIRATION

As Jesus sought for a way to explain his return, he hearkened back to the flood of Noah. Parallels are obvious. A message of judgment was proclaimed then. It is proclaimed still. People didn't listen then. They refuse to listen today. Noah was sent to save the faithful. Christ was sent to do the same. A flood of water came then. A flood of fire will come next. Noah built a safe place out of wood. Jesus made a safe place with the cross. Those who believed hid in the ark. Those who believe are hidden in Christ.

Most important, what God did in Noah's generation, he will do at Christ's return. He will pronounce a universal, irreversible judgment. A judgment in which grace is revealed, rewards are unveiled, and the impenitent are punished. As you read the story of Noah, you won't find the word *judgment*. But you will find ample evidence of one.

The era of Noah was a sad one. "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (Genesis 6:11). Such rebellion broke the heart of God. "His heart was deeply troubled" (verse 6). He sent a flood, a mighty purging flood, upon the earth. The skies rained for forty days. "The water rose so much that even the highest mountains under the sky were covered by it. It continued to rise until it was more than twenty feet above the mountains" (Genesis 7:19–20 NCV). Only Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark escaped.

Everyone else perished. God didn't slam the gavel on the bench, but he did close the door of the ark. According to Jesus, "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:39). And so a judgment was rendered.

Talk about a thought that stirs anxiety! Just the term *judgment day* conjures up images of tiny people at the base of a huge bench. On the top of the bench is a book and behind the bench is God and from God comes a voice of judgment—Guilty! *Gulp*. We are supposed to encourage each other with these words? How can the judgment stir anything except panic?

For the unprepared, it can't. But for the follower of Jesus who understands the judgment—the hour is not to be dreaded. In fact, once we understand it, we can anticipate it. (From *When Christ Comes* by Max Lucado.)

## REACTION

**7.** One of the key elements of the "last days" will be the reality of judgment. Believers will be assessed at the judgment seat of Christ for the purpose of receiving rewards (see 2 Corinthians 5:10). Unbelievers will be judged at the Great White Throne (see Revelation 20). What is your honest reaction to this biblical fact?

**8.** How much effort do you think believers should expend trying to figure out the sequence of end-times events? Why?

**9.** What signs should we be looking for to know Christ's coming is near?

**10.** Do you think most believers truly live as though Christ could return at any moment? Do *you* live this way? Why or why not?

**11.** How can we live in preparation for the at-any-moment return of Christ (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 and 1 John 2:28)?

**12.** What are some activities in your life right now that, in light of eternity, are probably pretty pointless and a waste of time?

## LIFE LESSONS

The Old Testament writers predicted the first coming of Christ. In every case, their prophecies were fulfilled to the letter. Likewise, the New Testament documents contain explicit details about the second coming of Christ. Why should we doubt the veracity of these predictions? The implications for us are clear. If Christ is returning, and if his arrival is imminent, how are we living? Do our values and actions square with this ultimate reality? Or are we so focused on this life right now that we are forgetting the life just ahead? Either we heed and believe the promises of Christ, or we regard them as misguided and/or deceptive. There is no other choice.

## DEVOTION

*Lord Jesus, while I do not know all the details of your coming, I know the fact of it. You will return to earth. I believe your promises. Therefore, I need to be ready. As I read and reflect on your Word, renew my mind. Give me an eternal perspective that can help me avoid getting caught up in insignificant and worldly affairs.*

## JOURNALING

What are some of your unanswered questions about the “end times”?

## FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Matthew during this twelve-part study, read Matthew 24:1-25:46. For more Bible passages on the return of Christ, read Mark 13:1-23; Luke 12:35-40; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; Titus 2:11-13; and Revelation 19.