

MATTHEW 24:36–44. (EHV)

“No one knows when that day and hour will be, not the angels of heaven, not even the Son, but only the Father. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be when the Son of Man returns. In fact, in the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the very day that Noah entered the ark. And they did not realize what was coming until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man returns. At that time two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. So be alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: If the master of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. You also need to be ready for this reason: The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him.”

I’m guessing that many of you, maybe even most of you, have heard of the Rapture, even though we don’t live in the so-called Bible Belt here in South Dakota. The teaching of the Rapture was made popular by the *Left Behind* series of movies in the early 2000s. The teaching of the Rapture, as it is taught by many American Evangelicals, is that prior to Judgment Day, dead and living believers will be raptured, or snatched up, to heaven from the earth, prior to a seven-year period of tribulation. The passage in front of us is used as one of the proof passages for the Rapture, since at first glance it appears that those not taken are left behind on earth for a period of time.

Today we want to take a closer look at this text. It does teach a rapture, but not the one taught in modern Evangelicalism. Today Jesus wants to help us **be ready for the real rapture**.

1. Because You Don’t Know When It Will Happen

Jesus says, “No one knows when that day and hour will be.” First, we need to take note that, in the context, the only day and hour that Jesus can be talking about is the Last Day, Judgment Day. In this chapter he has been talking about the signs leading up to the end of time, culminating in him coming on the clouds with power and great glory. Later Jesus says that when he comes in glory, all nations will be gathered before him and he will separate them, the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the wicked, and the righteous will enter eternal life, and the wicked will go away to eternal punishment. And that’s it. There aren’t any more people to deal with after this. There isn’t any more time on earth as we know it after this.

So when Jesus says here, “No one knows when that day and hour will be, not the angels of heaven, not even the Son, but only the Father,” the day and hour he is talking about is the Last Day, Judgment Day, when he comes in glory on the clouds with all his angels. And this is, in fact, the first way he helps us be ready for that day—by telling us no one knows when it will be. He of course has given all sorts of signs, signs that we covered a couple Sundays ago, but he didn’t say that he would come the day the last of those signs was fulfilled. They have all been fulfilled, and now he could come at any time, but no one knows exactly when. Jesus says that even he, in his state of humiliation prior to his resurrection and ascension, doesn’t know when.

Imagine if someone you trusted absolutely told you that they were sending you a brand new Ferrari sometime during your lifetime after today, but that you would need to be present when it was delivered so that you could sign for it, and that if you weren't there to sign for it, it would go to someone else. My guess is that you wouldn't go on vacation, you would have someone else do your shopping for you, and you would make other arrangement for work, probably working out of your home, every day until it was delivered. You would make sure you were always ready.

That's what Jesus wants from us. Thankfully, being ready for his return doesn't mean staying at home all the time and never going out or never going on vacation. It is an attitude of the mind and heart. It is being ready to suddenly stand before his judgment throne no matter where we are or what we are doing.

Jesus expands on this: "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be when the Son of Man returns. In fact, in the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the very day that Noah entered the ark. And they did not realize what was coming until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man returns." Now, the people in Noah's day should have known that the Flood was coming. God warned them they had 120 years to repent, and they did not. They saw God's prophet building an enormous boat on dry land, and they ridiculed him. But that's not Jesus's point. Jesus's point is, because they didn't listen, they were doing ordinary, everyday human activities right up until the Flood came. And that's how it is going to be on Judgment Day. Even with all the signs Jesus gives, it's not like there's going to be any sort of countdown. It's just going to happen. Maybe he'll come while you're eating dinner or enjoying an evening drink. Maybe he'll come during your wedding ceremony or wedding reception, or while you're attending someone else's. Maybe he'll come while you're out shopping or working or hunting or while you're watching television. Or maybe you'll be sleeping. So again, we must always be ready, because we don't know the day and the hour.

2. By Anticipating What Will Happen

Jesus also helps us to be ready by telling us what we can expect on the day he returns. He already talked about how the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from the sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. He already talked about how all the nations of the earth would see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory, and how he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call.

But all of this will happen very quickly. Jesus already hinted at this when he told us not only that no one knows the day, but also that no one knows the hour. If all of the events of Judgment Day didn't happen quickly, then when the sun and moon went dark and we heard the trumpet blast, we *would* know the hour. We would be able to say, "Oh, Jesus must be coming any hour, any minute now!" But that won't be the case. Everything on Judgment Day will happen quickly. In fact, it will happen so quickly that Jesus also says this: "That is how it will be when the Son of Man returns. At that time two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. So be alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Now, if Jesus is talking about the Last Day, when all people, living and dead, will be gathered before him, so that no one is left on earth, how can what he says here be true? The key is in what Jesus said earlier, in verse 31: “He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” So all people will be gathered before Jesus on Judgment Day, but it’s going to take place in a certain order. In 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul says that the angels will first gather those who have died in Christ and after that the believers who are still alive will be snatched up or caught up or raptured together with them in the clouds. This is the real rapture. It is a rapture of believers performed by angels on Judgment Day. If you’re out in the field with someone, and the sky goes dark and there’s a loud trumpet blast and your fellow worker is suddenly snatched away by an angel, things are not looking good for you. Make no mistake, in another second or so you’ll be gathered too, but the fact that you weren’t already snatched up with your fellow worker means that you’re being gathered last of all, along with all the other unbelievers.

This detail in itself is interesting. It shows that believers are not all off on mission trips or participating in marches, but are busy doing ordinary work, like plowing and harvesting and milling flour. It shows that it is not wrong for believers and unbelievers to work side by side. It shows that believers will not all succeed in converting those they interact with on a regular basis, though that certainly shouldn’t discourage us from trying. And it shows that believers should not expect that everyone in their communities or families or circle of friends and acquaintances is going to heaven, even if they know them as good people and good workers. Not everyone is going to be ready.

3. By Having a Ready Heart

But Jesus wants *you* to be ready. Jesus wants *you* to be among those who are taken or raptured by the angels as they are gathering the elect. “So be alert, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: If the master of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. You also need to be ready for this reason: The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Jesus says if we want to be ready, we need always to be spiritually awake. We heard Paul say something similar earlier: “It is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost over, and the day is drawing near. So let us put away the deeds of darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let us walk decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual sin and wild living, not in strife and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:11–14). In other words, in order to remain spiritually awake, live in repentance. Live in your baptism, in which the body of sin was rendered powerless and in which you put on Christ. Live in God’s word, which rebukes our sins and offers forgiveness, which it also does in the Sacrament. Live in faith, which not only receives God’s forgiveness, but also puts it to work in struggling against sins of the flesh.

You know that you need to be ready for the real rapture at any time, and you know what to expect when the time comes, but your heart will only be in the right condition if you remain in the light of Christ, remain in the light of his Word and sacraments, remain in the light of faith.

Eat and drink, but don't live for eating and drinking. Marry and give in marriage, but don't live for marriage and for pleasures of the flesh. Build and till and plant and mill, but don't live for your work. And don't live for your rest and vacations either. Live for Christ your Savior, the one who has reconciled you with his Father, the one in whom you are elected from eternity for eternal life, the one who has shone his light on you, who has shown the world for what it really is, has shown you for what you really are, has shown God for the gracious Father he really is, and death for what it really is—the gate to life eternal.

Be ready for the real rapture, not some supposed rapture before Judgment Day, but for the rapture of believers by the angels on Judgment Day. Be ready in Jesus Christ. Amen.