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Get Ready for the End Times! - Part 5
Matthew 24:42-51

By Tal Davis

In this five-part series, we have been studying Jesus' teachings on the signs leading up to the last days as recorded in Matthew chapter 24. He and His disciples sat on the Mount of Olives where He talks about the events leading to the end times and His return. In the first parts of the chapter. He had told them the Jerusalem Temple was soon to be destroyed, difficult times were coming, not to believe false messiahs or prophets, and that no one knows the time of the end. Nonetheless, they were to be ready for His return at any time. Throughout the chapter He imparted important principles related to His coming. To read installments 1-4 click on the following links:

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In this fifth and final installment, Jesus addresses how His followers are to live until the end comes and He returns.

Be Alert! - Matthew 24:42-44

42 "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. 43 But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 44 For this reason you must be ready as well; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

In the previous section, the Lord had informed the disciples that no one knows the day or hour of His return except God the Father. Even He, God the Son, did not know. (vs. 36) In any case, He used the example of the era of Noah to impress upon them the need to be ready at any time. The people then were unaware of the judgment to come and went on with their lives in ignorance.

So, in verse 42, Jesus reiterates the need for awareness and preparation. He again implores them to be on the alert, or keep watch. Unlike the people in Noah's generation, they need to keep their eyes and ears open to what is going on around them. He does not want them to get caught off guard.

Notice, He makes the admonition personal, "*For you do not know which day your Lord is coming.*" "*Your Lord*" (*ho kyrios hymon* - "the Lord of you") is significant for several reasons. It is, first of all, reflective of the title given to God by the Jews. The Hebrew name for God was spelled *YHWH* (probably pronounced Yahweh). The Jewish practice was (and still remains) never actually to pronounce that sacred name except by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. In their public readings of Scripture, and in sermons, it was replaced with the Hebrew word for Lord (*Adonai*). In the mid-3rd Century B.C., the Hebrew Bible was translated by Hebrew scholars into Greek (the version called the Septuagint). The translators followed the Jewish substitution principle for the name God in the Old Testament. So *YHWH* was rendered as *Kyrios* (LORD). Later, most translations of the Old Testament into other languages, including English, maintained that tradition. So, in most English Bibles the name of God is rendered LORD (all caps).

This is important because usually when the New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages, they are from the Greek Septuagint version. It is especially sig-

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nificant because throughout the New Testament Jesus is called "Lord" (*Kyrios*), the title for God! This is a key indicator that the writers of the New Testament considered Jesus equal to God. In this verse, Jesus uses that title for Himself implying His own recognition of His deity. He is "your Lord" who is someday coming again.

In verse 43, Jesus uses another short, and maybe a bit humorous, parable to make His point. This one involves a case of the crime of breaking and entering. He uses the illustration of a hypothetical "head of the house" ("master of the house") whom He ironically puts in a position that is untenable. He paradoxically surmises what would be true if the "man had known what time of the night the thief was coming." That is clearly an unimaginable scenario. What thief would tell his victim the exact time he was going to break in and rob his domicile?

Regardless of the absurdity of His premise, Jesus says that if the man somehow did know when the thief was coming (perhaps the police had undercover informants), he would naturally be ready. He says, "he would have been on the alert," probably by evacuating his family and arming himself with some kind of weapon. If so, then he would not have allowed his house to be broken into (literally, "dug through" - The houses in those days were made of mud and clay and were easily breached by picks and shovels).

But, in Jesus' mind (verse 44), as ridiculous as that crime situation was, it made for a perfect example of how most people are looking for His coming. They are no more ready for the Lord's return than the householder was for the thief. So He reminds them one more time, "you must be ready as well!" He then makes one of His most important statements concerning His coming. They must be ready "for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will." "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite title for Himself taken from the Old Testament. The Jews understood that, by Jesus applying it to Himself, Jesus was making an audacious claim to Messianic authority

and, by implication, Deity. In this context He applies it to His ultimate return at the end of the age. (see Dan. 7:13)

The application of these passages is obvious for us today. We still do not know when the Lord will return, but we can be assured that at the right time He will come. And, if Jesus' words are true, it will not be when everyone expects. We hear and read so many "experts" on eschatology claiming that certain contemporary events are sure signs that He is coming very soon. They may be right, but even if they are wrong we should be ever ready for the day to arrive. In the next section He tells us how, using another vivid image.

The Faithful Slave - Matthew 24:45-47
45 "Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household slaves, to give them their food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 47 Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions."

Jesus now tells another parable. He introduces it with a question in verse 45. He links this inquiry to what He has been saying in the previous section about the need to be watchful and ready. "Who," He asks, "is the faithful and sensible slave?" Servant (*doulos*) in this context means someone who is totally accountable to, and is even the property of, another person. Slavery was a universally accepted practice in the ancient Roman dominated world. In Italy itself, one person in three was a slave, as was about 20% of the population in the rest of the empire. Slaves had no legal rights, but were, in the main, treated humanely. They worked as farm laborers and household servants, and, in many cases, were better off materially than most free people.

A person could become a slave in various ways. Most were the offspring of slaves or destitute parents. Others were prisoners of war, defaulters of debts, convicted criminals, victims of kidnapping, or even volunteers. They came from all races and countries in the empire or beyond. They could at any point be freed by their owners, or could buy

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their own freedom. These were like those in the "Freedmen's Synagogue" in Jerusalem who argued with Stephen. (Acts 6:9) In this parable Jesus did not comment on or judge the morality of slavery. It does not mean He approved of it, but that was simply not His purpose for telling this story.

Certain highly trusted slaves had special status in the households of the masters. These were designated as "stewards" or "overseers." Stewards, or chief servants, were granted exceptional authority to manage the master's home or business interests. He was expected to supervise the other slaves and to enhance the master's financial status. In this parable the master apparently is going away for a while. He expects his hypothetical chief servant to operate the home front well and to secure adequate provisions for the material needs of the other slaves. They depended on the head servant to treat them well, and especially distribute food for them and their families at the appropriate times.

In the story, in verse 46, Jesus makes a well-defined contrast between what He regards as a good servant versus a wicked servant. First, He says, "*Blessed is that slave*" who is good. Where did Jesus use that phrase before? The Beatitudes, of course. (Matt. 5) "Blessed" (*makarios*) means to be happy or envied. So the master will make happy the chief servant who is hard at work when the master unexpectedly comes back from the journey to check on how things are going. The master probably assumes the steward is doing his job, but like any good proprietor he will come to assess the progress of his business.

It is sort of like the owner of an NFL football team. He first hires a man to be the General Manager and CEO to administer the business end of the franchise. Then, together they hire a head coach to train and lead the players on the field and to hire qualified assistants. The owner puts his trust in their hands to do a good job (i.e.: win games and championships). Nonetheless, on occasion the owner will visit the training camp and sit down with

the staff to evaluate the progress of the team. If they are winning and handling the finances well, the staff will "be blessed" by the owner (usually by being paid more).

Notice in verse 47, Jesus prefaced this sentence with, "*Truly I say to you.*" As you may recall, whenever Jesus begins a statement with that phrase, He intends for the hearers to listen carefully and heed His words. (vs. 24:2) He wants the listeners to make the spiritual connection between the hypothetical story He is telling and its real application for their lives.

So then Jesus says that if the master arrives unannounced and sees that the chief servant is doing a good job, he will give him even greater responsibility and more privileges. In this case "*he will put him in charge of all his possessions.*" The servant's positive accomplishments demonstrated to the master that because he is competent and trustworthy in the lesser things, he can now be relied on in the greater things. This principle makes a lot of sense, as any business owner knows. Jesus applies it to their spiritual conditions as well. Those who are faithfully doing the will of God will be given greater rewards and responsibilities – "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be expected.*" (Luke 12:48b)

If Christians want to be ready for Christ's return, they should not be speculating about when it will happen. That is a waste of time, as Jesus has already made clear. Rather, they should be about doing the Lord's work and honoring Him in every aspect of their lives. Many young people, and even older adults, often express their desire to do more for Christ. Some sincerely will say, "If God opens the door I will gladly go through it!" Then they wait around wasting valuable years. The fact is, the doors are already wide open for Christians who want to serve in God's kingdom! Dozens of missionary agencies, Christian evangelistic ministries, and relief organizations are always on the lookout for interested peo-

ple. They need not wait for them to call, they can assertively inquire for opportunities until the Lord shows them where He can best use their gifts.

The Unfaithful Slave - Matthew 24:48-51

48 But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,' 49 and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and he eats and drinks with those habitually drunk; 50 then the master of that slave will come on a day that he does not expect, and at an hour that he does not know, 51 and he will cut him in two and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

On the other hand, Jesus says in verse 48, what if the chief slave is evil (*kakos*) and thinks the master is not returning soon? What if he “*says in his heart 'My master is not coming for a long time'*” (*Chronizei*)? Perhaps the servant thought the master was off having a good time on vacation and was in no hurry to return to the stress of the household. He presumed he had plenty of time to organize things before the master returned. That is the definition of procrastination.

So (verse 49), with his false sense of security, the evil servant takes advantage of the situation for his own benefit. He starts to beat his fellow slaves and lord it over them with his authority as overseer. But the extent of the evil slave's insolence does not end with his ill treatment of his cohorts. Jesus says “*he eats and drinks with those habitually drunk.*”

The drinking of fermented wine was widespread in the ancient world (there were no distilled alcoholic beverages). Nonetheless, servings were extremely diluted by contemporary standards. According to Jewish rabbinical teachings, normal Jewish wine servings were to be at least two parts water to only one part fermented wine. For the Passover meal, it was four parts water to one part wine. Drinking to the point of intoxication was condemned and considered barbaric. The Apostle Paul warned against such behavior suggesting a better way, “And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living (“dissipation” or “debauchery”), but be filled by the Spirit: speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:18-19; see also: Prov. 20:1; 23:20-21, 29-35; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-25)

Apparently, Jesus shares that perspective. The evil servant whiled away his hours overeating and getting drunk with his buddies. He completely ignored the work he was supposed to do and the workers he was supposed to supervise. As long as he thought the boss was not coming back any time soon, if ever, he was going to take it easy and enjoy life.

So the evil servant was both a “Simon Legree” and an alcoholic. In his mind, there was plenty of time to make things right before the master came home. We may think that Christ's return is still far off, and it may be. But we have no excuse to live only for ourselves and our personal prosperity waiting for him to come.

The evil servant in Jesus' story made a terrible miscalculation in verse 50. He erroneously thought the master's return was a long way off. But Jesus says the servant's hypothetical master “*will come on a day that he does not expect.*” The servant woefully underestimated the punctuality of the master's homecoming to evaluate his stewardship. Can you imagine the chief servant's terror when he saw his master's entourage coming down the road? In any case, the good servant was ready and the wicked servant was not.

The Lord also reiterates the point that the Son of Man's coming, like the master's, will be “*at an hour that he does not know.*” As we have emphasized repeatedly, no one should try to guess or calculate when Christ will return. It could be tomorrow, next week, next year, or centuries from now. Jesus told his disciples that only the Father in heaven knows. (vs. 36) Whether we are ready or not, He will come when the time is right. Here again is the primary principle Jesus has extolled numerous times in this discourse. The end will come when everybody least expects it. (v. 44) Like the wicked servant, the world goes on its merry way doing sinful things, never wondering or worrying about what the future holds or being accountable to God.

The Lord concludes this particular parable in verse 51 with what seems to be a harsh denouncement. He says that the master, upon his arrival home, will survey the status of his property under the wicked servant's management. Jesus says “*he will cut him in pieces,*” or severely scourge him. Scourging was an extremely painful form of physical punishment involving whips and wooden rods.

The master will also “*assign him a place with the hypocrites.*” Hypocrisy is the act of a person pretending to be what he is not. The word is derived from Greek theater where actors wore masks to portray their parts. In Jesus' usage He applies it to someone who makes himself or herself out to be more righteous than he or she really is. He especially aimed His charge at the scribes and Pharisees who went about acting pious and holy. (Matt. 6:5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:18-27) Jesus had no patience with such pretentiousness done without humility in the name of God.

The ultimate fate of the wicked servant and the hypocrites, in contrast to the blessedness of that of the faithful servant, is a place of "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*." Just where that terrible place is He does not spell out in this discussion. But, based on Jesus' other teachings on the subject of judgment, we can know it is a place of eternal punishment. "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matt. 25:41, 44)

Thus, Jesus completes this stark parable. Through it, He imparts to His disciples (and to us) several major spiritual principles. For one, God's rewards and punishments at the final judgment will depend in large part on the stewardship of His people to do the tasks He has assigned. Second, faithful servanthood involves persevering even in the face of not knowing when the Lord will return, always mindful that He could come at any time. Finally, He warns those who circumvent or procrastinate in carrying out their responsibilities. If they only live for their own comfort and sinful pleasure, they will find when He comes, whether sooner or later, that it will be too late to make recompense for their evil actions.

This concludes this five-part series on Jesus' teaching on the end times. The main point is that we don't know when Christ will return. Nonetheless, we must stay on the alert so He will not find us unprepared. God has given us all certain responsibilities in life, and gifted us spiritually to accomplish them. So we should be faithful to what He has called us to do until He comes or until we die. Though the time of Christ's coming is uncertain, we should not just live for ourselves and do what we want while we wait for Him. He will come when we don't expect it. Also, none of us knows the time of our death. Of course, the most important preparation is to make sure that Jesus Christ is your personal Lord and Savior. Only then can you be absolutely ready for His return!

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