

“What’s the Holdup?”

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

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Our Scripture readings for today have been causing disagreements in the church for quite a while now. The passage from 1 Thessalonians 4 in particular is one of those passages of Scripture that, regardless of how you interpret it, is bound to result in someone calling you a heretic from one camp or the other. There was recently yet another movie released based on the *Left Behind* series of Christian fiction, which are in turn based on one particular interpretation of these texts and other Scriptures. That interpretation that understands 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 as predicting a Rapture in which God’s people are removed from the earth before God’s final work is an interpretation that has dominated much of American evangelical Protestantism for the last century or so, and there are a number of historical and social movements tied up in that interpretation. We don’t have the time in this setting to delve very deeply into evaluating that position, so I’m going to do my best this morning to avoid the charge of heresy; if you want to talk more about the details of that passage with me, we’ll talk over coffee sometime.

Instead, I think it’s always best to come at these sorts of texts asking the “So what?” question. It’s very easy to start reading end times interpretations and quickly find yourself neck deep in charts and timetables and maps, and before long you can learn all kinds of things about what different people think about these texts without actually learning anything about God or what He wants you to do. When it is read rightly, Scripture is transformational, not just informational, and so it is always appropriate to read these sorts of passages and ask, “So what? What does God want of me in response? How does this transform me into the image of Christ?” That’s how we’re going to handle them today, though we’re going to do that by coming at them slightly sideways.

Our main text comes to us from Matthew 25, right in the middle of what is known as the Olivet Discourse, a block of teaching from Jesus beginning in Matthew 24 in which He teaches at length on the signs of His “coming” and the end of the age. There’s a lot to deal with in this passage, and again, a lot of it is clouded up by centuries of interpretation and misinterpretation. When we hear Jesus talking about the “end of the age” we often assume that He’s talking about future events, and while that’s kind of accurate, there’s more going on here than just Jesus predicting the future.

For centuries, God’s prophets and preachers had been promising that there would come a Day of the Lord when things would be made right. Justice would prevail — true justice, God’s justice, not that imperfect idea of justice that we do our best with in our courts. When God’s authority was finally and completely established again over His creation, things would be as they were meant to be. And the understanding was that God would send an anointed one, a Messiah, to usher in that Day of the Lord. So the question all along during Jesus’ ministry has been whether He is that Messiah. Is He the one that was promised, or should we expect someone else? And if He is the Messiah, how can we know? When is He going to do those things we expect the Messiah to do? When will things finally be set right, and what will they look like, and why, Jesus, does your understanding of the kingdom of God look so different than what we expected?

This Olivet Discourse is in response to these sorts of questions by Jesus’ disciples. They’ve been with Him for several years now, and He has now been in the capital city of Jerusalem for the last

week debating with the religious authorities. The debate really centers on whose vision of the kingdom of God is the right one, and things seem to be coming to a head. Jesus' disciples are therefore asking for direction on what to look for. How will we know that your vision of the kingdom of God is the right one? What will it look like when that kingdom fully arrives? Not to be impatient, Jesus, but you've shown us a lot about the kingdom, but there are still some things we're waiting on, so where are they?

In chapter 23, coming after a long debate with the religious leaders of the day, Jesus basically pronounced judgment upon them as being hypocrites because they relied on self-righteousness for the sake of building up their own power. One of the signs of the end of the age, then, is God's continued judgment on those people and their view of God's kingdom. Jesus preaches a kingdom that is graciously open to all who will humbly come, while they preach a kingdom that excludes the unworthy based on lists of manmade rules. The sign that Jesus is right and they are wrong, then, will be the destruction of the temple that is the seat of their power. Along with that will come all kinds of tribulation. At some point after that will come the rest of the Day of the Lord, when God will finally and completely be present among His people.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," Jesus says. And that's at the core of the parable Jesus tells us in our reading from Matthew 25. The arrival of the bridegroom, the moment everyone's been waiting and preparing for, will happen, but no one knows when He will come. That was how weddings were done in that culture, so it was an image that was much more familiar to them than it is to us. The point is that no one knows when it will come, so the moral of the story is, "therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." Be ready for it. Make preparations. Don't get complacent and fall asleep.

And that brings us to the "So what?" question. What's the point of all of this for us? I think perhaps a more enlightening way of looking at this is to ask instead what's taking so long. What's the holdup? Why is God waiting to bring about that Day of the Lord? Parts of this Discourse have long been fulfilled; the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, but much of the rest has yet to happen. Jesus has not yet returned, to many peoples' surprise, dismay, or amusement. What's the holdup? And indeed, even the people listening to this Discourse when Jesus preached it could have asked the same question. Why was Jesus telling them that there would be a delay in the coming of the Day of the Lord? The point of the Messiah, they thought, was to bring the kingdom, so why isn't He finishing the job? And then to go on and say that even He doesn't know when that day or hour will be makes it even worse.

And the question was still being asked in the early church days. The first generation of Christians had seen Jesus raised from the dead, so they had seen the greatest evidence of His vindication. But still they waited for the fulfillment of the kingdom. God was not yet fully present among His people. Evil still seemed to run amok. Justice seemed fleeting at best. Faithful Christians were being persecuted and martyred for their faith. And eventually that first generation started passing away. These are questions we still ask today; what's the holdup?

In his letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul is trying to encourage them that God will still be faithful to those who have died in Christ. The image he relies on is not that of a bridegroom coming to take His bride home, though, and it's probably also not a description of the Rapture as some people

envision it. Instead, he's relying on the image of a great lord arriving at or returning to a city that is under that lord's authority, and as the lord comes near, the residents of the city go out of the city and escort the lord back into the city that is rightfully his. It's the image of the Lord's arrival, not an image of escape for the people. And the point that Paul is making is that those who have already died will not be left behind: God will be faithful to them, and in resurrecting them He will include them in the victory procession.

The point, therefore, is to be patient, be encouraged, and be ready. God will be faithful to complete His work, and He will be faithful to His people. However, we don't know when that will come, so be prepared. Be awake. Paul goes on in 1 Thessalonians 5 to say just that, echoing Jesus' words in Matthew 25, that the "times and dates" are known only to God, and therefore we should remain "awake and sober."

So what's holding God up? Why has the church been waiting for the last two thousand years, especially considering that the Jews had already waited so long for the Messiah to come? We could suggest any number of reasons. When the prophet Elijah was engaged in his showdown with the prophets of the pagan god Ba'al on Mount Carmel and Ba'al failed to show up, he taunted the prophets of Ba'al by suggesting that maybe their god was busy going to the bathroom. But our God is not too occupied by mundane, vulgar things to get around to us; He is not absent. Or some might suggest that He is simply not able to do what He promised; maybe death and hell are simply stronger. Maybe God has changed His mind, or maybe He doesn't exist, or maybe Jesus wasn't actually God's anointed one, or maybe He forgot about us, or He got so mad at our sin that He has abandoned us.

But no, none of that is consistent with the character of the God revealed in thousands of years of Scripture and church history, and in your life and in mine. None of that is consistent with the power of God revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our God is not absent or indisposed or forgetful or powerless or capricious. No, our God is merciful, gracious, generous, just, loving, faithful, and mighty to save. So why wait, when it causes such confusion? Because God is also patient. Why, when Israel had rejected God so many times for so many generations, and when they had broken their covenant with Him time and time again, and when the covenant included judgment when it was broken, why did God wait so long to remove them from the land and take them into exile? Because God is patient. He wanted to give them a second chance, and a third chance, and a fourth, and on and on. God waited because He wanted to forgive.

The book of 2 Peter deals with this same issue: "do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God may have many reasons for waiting to finish this Day of the Lord that He began with the arrival of His Son, but it's safe to say that at least one of the biggest reasons is because He wants more people to join His family. In Ezekiel's prophecy, God asks, "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" When Jesus ascended to be with His Father, He commissioned His church to go and make disciples, initiating them into the kingdom. He passed the mission of proclaiming the power and mercy of God on to us.

And so there is within this waiting both good news and a challenge. The good news is that if you're not prepared for the kingdom to come, there is still time. The challenge is that you don't know how much time you have, so you need to get ready now. Even if Jesus takes another two thousand years to return, you may not have tomorrow; that's just how life works. So the call is to be ready, because there is mercy for those who have repented and there is judgment for those who have fallen asleep.

And the further implication of God's mercy is that He does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. He has given us this time not merely so that we can get our own souls in order, but also so that we can proclaim the good news to others. You and I are God's favorite method for bringing the lost into the kingdom. Cultivate the same desire that our God has, the desire to see those who are lost become found. Let your life be an example of one that is ready, one that is redeemed, one that is a proclamation of God's goodness while we wait.

Benediction: You do not know the day or the hour. Therefore, keep watch, and while you watch, go and make disciples.



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