**THE GRACE TO WAIT**

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**Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44**

These Bible verses blend together like a crossword puzzle to tell us something amazing--that: When the night is gone and the day is near, we will put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans), for the son of man has come at an unexpected hour (Matthew).

Then we will walk in the light of the Lord (Isaiah) with our feet standing within his gates (Psalm 122) and be at peace with God within our walls and rest in the quietness within our towers (Psalm 122). For then we will view the mountain of the Lord’s house raised above the hills (Isaiah) for the sake of our kindred and companions (Psalm 122).

These verses are prophecy of the future not yet come to pass. They talk of a time when Christ will return to this world to return it to peace. But let’s not overlook the fact that Christ’s return also means judgment: two will be in the field; one will be taken (that is, to heaven) and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal; one will be taken, one will be left. Christ’s second coming promises both the joy and fear of facing the Lord. The wheat and the chaff are side by side. Who will reap joy and who fear?

These are complex verses for Christians to ponder and interpret. But maybe the first part of verse 44 in Matthew 24, helps us out: It starts out with: “therefore you must also be ready, (for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”) But ready for what? I think the life of King David sheds some light here.

Remember David, the shepherd king, of the Old Testament, who was called a man after God’s own heart? In one of his Psalms, David begged God to, “Turn to me, oh Lord, for I am lonely and afflicted.”

David was an adulterer and murderer. In his deep guilt and sorrow, David confessed these dark sins to God and asked: “Don’t remember the sins of my youth.” David knew he needed God’s grace, but didn’t deserve it; he asked for it anyway, and got it. David understood God’s loving and forgiving heart, because David’s heart was like God’s. Imperfect people often know God’s heart better than “perfect” people do.

Jesus spent most of his precious time ministering to imperfect people: sinners and social outcasts. And the stiff-necked, self-proclaimed, perfect religious people of the day definitely got even with Christ for daring to do so. Well those perfect people are still around today, just as judgmental as ever against people in jail; drug addicts; street people; prostitutes; gang members; criminals on death row and churches different from theirs.

And as incredible as it must seem to perfect Christians, Jesus will come back on that unknown day for these same struggling, humble imperfect people. But why? Because God’s son loves them and knows that many sinners have hearts-after-God’s-own-heart. And like David, they can’t change their past lives, but they long to change their current lives. Only they don’t know how. Jesus isn’t around now to tell them himself, and too many Christians simply avoid sinners and don’t tell them the good news.

In our secularized nation and world, with its quarreling institutionalized religions, just how many of our struggling, imperfect kindred and companions have ever experienced God’s true forgiveness and grace? Christ has been moved aside by the secular world: the media, politics, social institutions, corporations, and even some churches.

So when will the lost walk in the light of the Lord, as mentioned by Isaiah? Or see the mountain of the Lord’s house raised above the hills where their feet can stand within his gates, as proclaimed in Isaiah and Psalm 122? When will the night be gone for today’s socially-rejected sinners who have never encountered Christ?

That’s why the gospels mention Christ’s return, which implies that sometime in the future, the good news about Christ’s forgiveness will no longer be told. So Jesus will come back to this broken world to tell sinners himself.

I’ve run across many professing Christians who say they just can’t wait for Christ to return. They revel in how he will arrive as Jesus-the-avenger to clean out all sin and sinners to make our world a perfect place for perfect people. Yet I wonder if, like the angels in heaven, do these perfect Christians rejoice each time an imperfect sinner comes to Christ?

God waited long and patiently for many of us to replace our stone hearts with loving, forgiving hearts. So are we really in a hurry for Christ to come back for judgment? How many of our loved ones and friends would be spiritually prepared if Christ did return today? Would they be judged as wheat or chaff? It’s God’s mercy to delay that unknown day—his grace to wait.

And isn’t Christ depending on his imperfect forgiven people--his modern day disciples, you and me--to carry on his humble ministry of grace until he returns? Surely we can extend the same grace God has blessed us with to our kindred and companions, so they also can find peace within their walls and quietness within their towers.

Think of some of the New Testament people with hearts-after-God’s-own-heart who none-the-less struggled to find Jesus, understand him, walk with him, and eventually minister with him. Let’s start with Peter, who denied Christ; then Paul the apostle, who persecuted Christians; and then Thomas the doubtful; Matthew the despised tax collector; Martha the nervous wreck; and John the Baptist, the pessimist. All of these Christians struggled for a time.

Think of the biblical people who might not have encountered Christ without the loving, patient concern of others: Mary Magdalen; the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; the paralyzed man lowered through a roof to Jesus by four faithful friends; the neighbors of the Samaritan woman Jesus encountered at the well and spiritually renewed; the insistent Canaanite mother whose daughter was healed by Jesus; and the scores of deaf, blind, and lame who were healed. These dear people all received plenty of help and support from others before they met the man from Galilee.

Now recall the names of people God brought to you for spiritual help and renewal. Christ didn’t have to return in person to help these people—you did in your own quiet, invisible way.

My thoughts often return to the struggling, imperfect people I met in Central Texas jails and prisons who had hearts-after-God’s-own heart. They thought they were beyond God’s reach because of their sins:

* The man devastated after receiving the “Dear John” divorce letter from his wife, who tired of waiting for him. He had a heart-after-God’s-own heart because, in his stream of tears, he understood why and forgave her for divorcing him.
* A newly arrived prisoner in county jail asked me why jail guards had cut him with a screwdriver up and down his now scarred torso. His heart-after God’s-own-heart voiced no hatred for the guards, even though he couldn’t understand why they tortured him.
* A long-timer maximum security inmate showed his heart-after God’s-own-heart as he confessed to a room full of inmates how awful he had treated his wife and family. Tears literally soaked his prison shirt.
* The mother in a Gatesville prison for killing her extremely abusive husband asked what was going to happen to her three children without her at home. She had a heart-after-God’s-own- heart, because she worried about her innocent children, not herself.
* And a gentle young man doing time for a minor crime lit up with joy in a Bible study upon hearing for the first time what Easter was really all about. His heart-after-God’s-own-heart rejoiced in innocent wonderment over the resurrection of Jesus. And he didn’t have to wait on Jesus’ return to hear the good news.

God brings people into our lives so that they can see Jesus through us. Even though the son of man is indeed coming again at an unexpected hour, let’s not focus on that. Instead, let’s minister to the imperfect people God occasionally brings into our lives.

Whether we walk with Christ in this world or in heaven, we are assured of a blessed future. We will truly be perfect then, but for now, let’s imperfectly strive to let others see Christ in us, so they might see Christ in themselves and know the good news to share with yet another imperfect person.

In our grace-to-wait on imperfect sinners, our imperfect world won’t become perfect. But the angels will celebrate in heaven--and so can we if we have the grace-to-wait on judgment. Let’s leave judgment to the infinite love and wisdom of our father in heaven.

And all of God’s children say, AMEN.