

## Historical Commentary

Advent 1 - Year A



The Liturgy Letter

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### Commentary on Matthew 24:36-44 from Church Fathers & John Calvin

Hilary of Poitiers: When Christ taught us that no one knows the day on which the end of time will come, not the angels and not even himself, he removed from us any need to be concerned about its date. O immeasurable mercy of divine goodness! Since the Son said, “All things have been delivered to me by my Father,” we know that the Father did not deny him the knowledge of this day. If anything was denied him, he could not have said that all things were delivered to him. But because the Son has handed on to us everything the Father gave him and the Word of God does not contain in himself as much assurance of the future as of things already accomplished, therefore it was established by God that the date of the end should be indefinite. Thus he could allow us an abundant amount of time for repentance yet still keep us solicitous for fear of the uncertain and so as to avoid giving anyone the idea of a particular day by expressing his will. For just as at the time of the flood, in the normal course of our life, in our activities and in our sufferings, that great day will suddenly appear.

Chrysostom: He spoke these things in order to show that he would return unexpectedly and suddenly and when many were living luxuriously. For Paul also says this: “When they shall speak of peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them.” To show just how unexpectedly he uses the metaphor “as travail comes upon a woman with child.”

Chrysostom: What then is meant by “after the tribulation of those days”? If there is to be luxury at that time, and peace and safety, as Paul indicates, how then can he say, “after the tribulation of those days”? If there is luxury, how is there also tribulation? The luxury is spoken of those who are in a state of insensibility and peace. He does not say that there will be peace but rather “when they speak of peace and safety,” indicating that their

insensibility would be something like those in Noah's time, that even amid such evils they lived in luxury. Yet it will not be a time of peace and luxury for the righteous. The righteous will be passing through this time of tribulation in dejection. He shows that when antichrist has come, the pursuit of unlawful pleasures shall be more eagerly pursued among the transgressors, who have learned to despair of their own salvation. There will then be gluttony, partying and drunkenness. He then offers an example of this

Origen: All who listen to the depths of the gospel and live it so completely that none of it remains veiled from them care very little about whether the end of the world will come suddenly and all at once or gradually and little by little. Instead, they bear in mind only that each individual's end or death will arrive on a day and hour unknown to him and that upon each one of us "the day of the Lord will come like a thief." It is important therefore to be vigilant, whether in the evening (that is, in one's youth) or in the middle of the night (that is, at human life's darkest hour) or when the cock crows (at full maturity) or in the morning (when one is well advanced in old age). When God the Word comes and brings an end to the progress of this life, he will gather up the one who gave "no sleep to his eyes nor slumber to his eyelids" and kept the commandment of the One who said, "Be vigilant at all times." ...

Chrysostom: But his meaning is like this: If ordinary persons knew when they were going to die, they would surely be striving earnestly at that hour. In order therefore that they may strive, not at that hour only, he does not tell them the hour or day. He wants to keep them on their toes looking for it, that they may be always striving. This is why he made the end of each person's life so uncertain. In this passage he openly implies that he himself is Lord. Nowhere before has he spoken of this so distinctly. But here he seems to me also to be putting to shame those who remain careless about his lordship. They take much more care about a thief taking their money than about their own soul. Those who care about their house and do not want their possessions stolen take measures against the thief. They watch; they are prepared for the thief. So it is with you. You do not know when he will come. But you know assuredly that he will come. If you do not continue to watch, you will not be ready on that day. You will be unprepared. Destruction will come in your sleep. If the person had known when the thief was coming, he would have been prepared. So be like the one who is prepared at all times, so you will escape free.

Hilary of Poitiers: To teach us that our ignorance of the date of his return (which his silence has kept hidden from everyone) is not without its usefulness, Christ warns us to keep all his commandments. We should also be occupied with constant prayer in order to guard against the coming of the thief. For the thief is the devil who seeks to invade our bodily homes with the darts of his thoughts and allurements in order to ruin us while we are sleepy and careless. It is good therefore that we be prepared. Our ignorance of the day of Christ's return should provoke us to be careful as we eagerly await his coming.

John Calvin: But of that day and hour. By this sentence, Christ intended to hold the minds of believers in suspense that they might not, by a false imagination, fix any time for the final redemption. We know how fickle our minds are, and how much we are tickled by a vain curiosity to know more than is proper. Christ likewise perceived that the disciples were pushing forward with excessive haste to enjoy a triumph. He therefore wishes the day of his coming to be the object of such expectation and desire, that none shall dare to inquire when it will happen. In short, he wishes his disciples so to walk in the light of faith, that while they are uncertain as to the time, they may patiently wait for the revelation of him. We ought therefore to be on our guard, lest our anxiety about the time be carried farther than the Lord allows; for the chief part of our wisdom lies in confining ourselves soberly within the limits of God's word. That men may not feel uneasy at not knowing that day, Christ represents angels as their associates in this matter; for it would be a proof of excessive pride and wicked covetousness, to desire that we who creep on the earth should know more than is permitted to the angels in heaven.

But as the days of Noah were. Although Christ lately expressed his desire to keep the minds of his followers in suspense, that they might not inquire too anxiously about the last day; yet, lest the indifference arising out of the enjoyments of the world should lull them to sleep, he now exhorts them to solicitude. He wished them to be uncertain as to his coming, but yet to be prepared to expect him every day, or rather every moment. To shake off their sloth, and to excite them more powerfully to be on their guard, he foretells that the end will come, while the world is sunk in brutal indifference; just as in the days of Noah all the nations were swallowed up by the deluge, when they had no expectation of it, but rioted in gluttony and voluptuousness, and shortly afterwards, the inhabitants of Sodom, while they were abandoning themselves without fear to sensuality, were consumed by fire from heaven. Since indifference of this sort will exist about the time of the last day, believers ought not to indulge themselves after the example of the

multitude. We have now ascertained the design of Christ, which was, to inform believers that, in order to prevent themselves from being suddenly overtaken, they ought always to keep watch, because the day of the last judgment will come when it is not expected.

For you know not at what hour your Lord will come. It ought to be observed, that the uncertainty as to the time of Christ's coming — which almost all treat as an encouragement to sloth — ought to be felt by us to be an excitement to attention and watchfulness. God intended that it should be hidden from us, for the express purpose that we may keep diligent watch without the relaxation of a single hour. For what would be the trial of faith and patience, if believers, after spending their whole life in ease, and indolence, and pleasure, were to prepare themselves within the space of three days for meeting Christ?