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**Sunday 5 November 2023 to**

**Sunday 12 November 2023**

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**I’m not a Pharisee … am I?**

by Rachael Stelzer

***Everything they do is done for people to see (Matthew 23:5a).***

Read [Matthew 23:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+23%3A1%E2%80%9312&version=ESV)

This week focuses on Jesus’ discussions with and about the Jewish religious leaders after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He has been discussing, arguing, debating and showing up the two main factions of the Jewish religious leaders: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. At the end of the previous chapter, after attempting to trap, discredit and otherwise embarrass Jesus, the teachers of the law have withdrawn from the public eye to plot the removal of this troublemaker.

Now Jesus turns to the crowds, who have been spectators to the Big Debate. They may not have understood a word of the complex theologies and arguments they’ve heard, but they have loved seeing Jesus turn the faces of the most pompous and smug of their religious officials red. Jesus does not pull punches in describing the teachers of the law and warns people not to do as they do. They have various reasons for being smug, but their actions amount to hypocrisy.

I love to judge the teachers of the law. Those hypocrites! They do not practise what they preach! They really had it coming, and Jesus is letting them have it. Yeah!

And just as I am really starting to enjoy Jesus ripping into the ‘bad guys’, I notice this little phrase: ‘Everything they do is for people to see …’

Oh dear. Surely I’m not guilty of that?

Okay, I might slightly curate my social media feed and present my kids as little angels while carefully avoiding the photo angle that displays my full laundry baskets … I might scrub the family up to bring to church while my kids fight non-stop for the rest of the week. And, sure, when people come to my house, the living room is spotless because I throw everything behind my bed and leave heaving piles of toys, books and shoes that trip me up in the dark.

But I’m not a Pharisee … am I?

And, suddenly, I start to squirm. I guess there are a few things I’m smug about. And when it’s ‘all about me’ and my impressiveness, I might as well be a Pharisee. And every time I am less than impressive, where others can see, my carefully curated house of cards tumbles.

Perhaps I need to return to my Saviour, to his righteousness and grace. As the hymn reminds me, ‘Nothing in my hand I bring … simply to thy cross I cling’.

***Lord Jesus, prune away the Pharisee in me. Remind me of your grace that paid all for me. Thank you, Lord, that while I worry too much about outward appearance, you look at my heart. Amen.***

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Monday 6 November 2023

**How will it end?**

by Rachael Stelzer

***At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it (Mark 13:21).***

Read [Mark 13:14–27](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+13%3A14%E2%80%9327+&version=NRSVUE)

From time to time, I visit the religion classes at the school where I am a chaplain. The students love to ask me big questions and favourite topics include what heaven will be like and when the world will end.

At the time Mark wrote his gospel, the followers of Jesus were facing persecution and death for believing in him. I imagine that the end of the world – and Jesus’ return – were events they greatly yearned for, and Mark’s reporting of Jesus’ words here would have been of great importance to them.

For us in the Western world of 2023, with so much conflict in the world around us, natural disasters so prevalent, and so many voices around us promising peace, healing, comfort and self-actualisation, we, too, could use some words of wisdom around what is to come.

Jesus certainly did not sugar-coat his description of the End Times. It comes across as brutal and violent, chaotic and confusing. Jesus even warns that false messiahs will be presented, natural disasters will occur, and some may even attempt to ensnare some of God’s chosen.

But then Jesus reminds his people that ‘at that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens’.

What a beautiful comfort. At the end of the turmoil will come our Saviour to restore his people. With all the signs, warnings and confusion, where do we look? To Jesus, who has already won the ultimate battle to redeem all of creation and will come again to take us home. In this beautiful hope, we live.

***Dear Jesus, thank you for the comfort of knowing we do not need to despair – we just need to look to you and listen to your words of eternal life. Guard and guide our hearts as we trust in you. Amen.***

Tuesday 7 November 2023

**Be alert!**

by Rachael Stelzer

***But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come (Mark 13:32,33).***

Read [Mark 13:28–37](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+13%3A28%E2%80%9337+&version=NRSVUE)

At the start of this chapter, Jesus’ disciples asked him to tell them when the End Times would happen. He answers their question in two seemingly contrasting ways. First, he gives the example of the fig tree. When you see the leaves of the fig tree sprout, you know that summer is coming. So look around and see the signs that the end is imminently on its way.

Then, he changes the metaphor and emphasis entirely. He paints the picture of a master leaving his house and leaving servants in charge of the house. No one knows exactly when he will return. So, they need to be ready and alert for their master’s arrival.

Jesus’ message? Be alert, and look for the signs of his return, even though we do not know exactly when it will be. Do not become complacent, and do not despair, but be ready. Read the signs. Understand that his return will take us by surprise, but don’t be surprised when it does.

Mark’s audience had already witnessed the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and yearned for Christ’s return. In 2023, with the institutional church in decline around the world and with signs of the end all around us, shouldn’t we also look for these signs and stay alert for our Lord’s return?

***Dear Jesus, help us to look around us at the indicators that you will return and to serve you as best we can as we wait for your arrival. Let us love others in your name, and help us to welcome many more into your family as we wait for those beautiful words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’ (Matthew 25:21). Amen.***

Wednesday 8 November 2023

**Extravagant love**

by Rachael Stelzer

***She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial (Mark 14:8).***

Read [Mark 14:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A1%E2%80%9311+&version=NRSVUE)

After Mark reports Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on the back of a donkey foal and his visit around the temple, he includes a powerful event imbued with poignant power by the length of time between that event and its reporting.

The unnamed woman in this story has been variously guessed at and speculated about, but all we know for sure is that she wanted to show extravagant love to Jesus. And she did so, in the midst of a group of ‘righteous’ men horrified by this lavish act of care.

Jesus rebuked the men, telling them their thoughts of selling the perfume and giving the money to the poor missed the point. Readers of Mark's Gospel have the benefit of hindsight. We can understand Jesus' explanation that she poured perfume on his body beforehand to prepare for his burial. Jesus could see what was coming in the following few days, and for this act of generosity and care, he was grateful. And for this, the woman will be remembered through the ages.

How ironic that Judas Iscariot went straight to the teachers of the law after this event and agreed to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. He, too, will be remembered through the ages – in a completely different way.

***Dear Lord, let me be remembered for my lavish generosity and care for the least of your children rather than for my rightness or efficiency. Thank you for your extravagant love for me. Amen.***

Thursday 9 November 2023

**Amazing love!**

by Rachael Stelzer

***While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take it; this is my body’ (Mark 14:22).***

Read [Mark 14:12–26](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A12%E2%80%9326+&version=NRSVUE)

As the disciples prepared to celebrate the Passover, the festival of Jewish freedom from Egyptian captivity, Jesus told them what they would find and need to say. They found everything just as Jesus had told them. He could see what was coming – and not just for the meal.

Jesus did not waste time when they sat down together, departing from the traditional Seder script to calmly state that one of the twelve would betray him. He continued to deviate from the standard script in claiming new meaning for the bread and wine – that this is Jesus’ body and blood, given and shed for them.

As Jesus shared this final meal with his friends, he foresaw that they would desert and deny him, despite their protests to the contrary. And yet, he continued to share a meal with them and love them.

What great mercy that the God we continue to fail and deny persists in loving us and sharing material and relational blessings with us. Amazing love!

***Dear Jesus, I continually put my needs first and fail you. I praise you for your great love, which has covered all my sins. Help me to turn back to you every day in the joy of repentance and your new start. Amen.***

Friday 10 November 2023

**Suffering love**

by Rachael Stelzer

***‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,’ he said to them. ‘Stay here and keep watch’ (Mark 14:34).***

Read [Mark 14:27–42](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A27%E2%80%9342+&version=NRSVUE)

On Wednesday, we read Jesus’ parable about the master who leaves the household in the care of his servants and leaves. The servants do not know when he will return, so they remain alert and awake for his arrival.

Now Jesus finds himself in Gethsemane with his closest friends and asks them to ‘stay awake’. This is the same word he used in the parable, just a day or two earlier – the servants were to stay awake as they looked forward to the master’s return. Three times he asks them to stay awake with him, and three times they fall asleep on the job.

We get a beautiful insight here into the lonely heart of Jesus, a heart that holds the knowledge of all that is to come the following day and also holds a fiercely burning love for his wayward, lost children – both for those on the Mount of Olives with him and for us, his 21st-century disciples. If we are honest, we fall away, deny and betray him as much as his early followers did. And if we look down the centuries at this sobbing man, we understand it was Jesus’ love for us that motivated those beautiful words of commitment as much as his friends on the hillside: ‘Yet not my will but yours be done’ (Mark 14:36).

Max Lucado put it beautifully when he said that Jesus would rather go through hell for us than go to heaven without us. Only this great love would put aside fear and pain for the benefit of the beloved. What a joy to know that our Saviour loves us that much.

***Dear Jesus, you knew what was coming. You felt the pain. You suffered the loneliness and betrayal. And you saw us. Your heart broke with love for all of us, and that love that created the universe gave itself to free us from the separation of sin. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.***

Saturday 11 November 2023

**Lord, give me patience – but hurry!**

by Rachael Stelzer

***Hasten, O God, to save me; come quickly, Lord, to help me (Psalm 70:1).***

Read [Psalm 70](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+70+&version=NRSVUE)

Psalm 40 is one of my favourite psalms. It is a joyful testimony of God’s ability to listen to and answer the prayers of his child, a later anthem of God’s earlier intervention and victory.

In reading Psalm 70, I remembered that Psalm 40 contains all of it – with some added sections. I wondered why God would choose to inspire the psalmist with the same words twice.

Psalm 70 is not an angry request for God to graphically smite one’s enemies – there are more than a few of those in Psalms. The author does not ask for anything more gruesome for their adversaries than pangs of conscience and feelings of shame at what they have done. It is not a miserable song of despair, asking where God is in the author’s troubles. If anything, the author demonstrates emotional intelligence and a humble spirit.

If there is a contemporary attitude that we could assign to this psalm, it seems to be a case of ‘Lord, give me patience – but hurry!’ The author has faith that their deliverance will happen but also expresses impatience and desperation to God.

The gift to me in this psalm is that there are no major details of what the author is struggling with, and like so many other psalms, this opens it up to be used by anyone at any time … and by me right now. Whatever I am facing, whoever or whatever is oppressing my soul, God is more powerful.

As in our reading on Sunday, the author comes humbly before God like the tax collector, recognising they have nothing to offer, but God is powerful. ‘I am poor and needy,’ says the psalmist. ‘O my God, do not delay.’

***Dear Lord, grant me the faith and trust to know you will intervene in whatever is troubling me. Give me the patience to wait on your timing and the cheek to keep bugging you. Thank you for your great parental compassion, which sees what I really need and acts. Keep me close to you. Amen.***

Sunday 12 November 2023

**Be prepared**

by Stuart Gray

***Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour (Matthew 25:13).***

Read [Matthew 25:1–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A1-13&version=NRSVUE)

How good are we at being prepared?  During the 2019–20 bushfires in Victoria, I spent time at an emergency relief centre as a Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry volunteer. My role was to be available to listen to people who were completely dislocated from their normal lives. Over the two days, I spoke with about 20 people. Most had made some fire preparations; some made very little preparation, even though at night, the sky was like an extended red sunset due to the fires. There was one young woman who came in quite distraught. Upon hearing her story, I told her that of all the people I had spoken to, she was the only one who had followed all the recommended preparations.

Despite all the exhortations to prepare, and with the fires raging around the district, in this sample, only one person in about twenty was fully prepared.

In this parable, Jesus says half the young women were prepared. It is interesting to note that initially, there is nothing to distinguish between the women, even to the extent they all fall asleep. But when the bridegroom comes, there is a very big distinction between the prepared and unprepared.

The wise were able to enter the banquet as they had fulfilled the requirements of their task to shine their light for the bridegroom.

The foolish couldn’t fulfil their requirements and were blocked from the banquet.

In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says, ‘Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’

I’ve often thought it was not very ‘Christian’ of the girls with the oil not to share it with the others. But the journey Jesus talks about is only something we can prepare for; no one else can do it for us. If someone wants to become a doctor, carpenter or priest, they have to do the study and take the exams if they want to qualify – no one else can do it for them.

We all have to discern the will of the Father for ourselves and be prepared.

How prepared are you?

***Father, we ask you to help us to be prepared to meet you at the eternal banquet. Make our light shine in this time of spiritual darkness so when our time comes to cry out, ‘Lord, Lord’, we may enter into your presence. Amen.***

*Stuart, with his wife Pamela Dalgliesh, lives in Mansfield, Victoria. Stuart has a background in agricultural science, rural journalism and corporate affairs. He loves living on a small farm in the beautiful High Country of Victoria, being involved in the Mansfield community and travelling, having in the last three years done extensive travels in Western Australia, Queensland, the United Kingdom and Ireland.*