



my  
hope  
is built

Where do you hang your hope? If all we have is what we find in this world, we are sunk. There is plenty to hope for, but not a lot of good news to build hope on for the future. Jesus is a place to build your hope. Jesus is a solid rock. Jesus, born on Christmas Day, is our hope and our salvation.



## MY HOPE IS BUILT • Matthew 24:36–44 • Jennifer Holz • December 1, 2019

Today we enter a season of hope and expectation. Today we begin our journey to the manger to worship a King born to save. It's Christmas time. Open your Bibles to Matthew 24:36–44. You'll notice that what I'm reading is not a traditional Christmas text, but a passage that sets an expectation of how we are to wait for the coming of Jesus. These words of Jesus are not about His first coming as a baby, but about the time when He will come again. "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:36–44). Matthew's message at the end of his gospel is as clear and compelling as it is at the beginning of his gospel when the wise men followed the star: Keep watch. Be ready. Don't miss Jesus.

"The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the whole history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down tool shed." Thus begins a beloved Christmas story of my generation, "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." Barbara Robinson writes about how the worst kids on the block find their way into the starring roles of their small-town Christmas Pageant, much to the horror of every church family in town. But the Herdmans are so mean, nobody says anything for fear of retribution. Along the way, they totally mess up the Christmas story (they'd never heard it before—how were they to know?). The wise men (Leroy, Claude and Ollie Herdman) bring ham to the baby Jesus. Gladys Herdman (the angel Gabriel) hollers at the shepherds so loudly they all start crying in fear that she might actually clobber them. Imogene Herdman, as Mary, shows up to the performance with a black eye and a crooked veil. She burps the baby Jesus and threatens to beat up Herod if he gets anywhere near them. Jesus is a baby doll, by the way. When all the young mothers find out Imogene is playing Mary, they quickly withdraw their offers to have their new babies star in the main role of Jesus. But surprisingly in all the chaos, the Herdmans (all six of them) meet Jesus. The most unlikely kids in the book are overcome by the Christmas story. It's a hilarious book of contrasts showing how Jesus can reach even the hardest of hearts. Along the way, we also discover that it's not just the Herdmans who need Jesus, it's everyone in the church, even Reverend Hopkins and Alice Wendleken (who felt she should have been cast as Mary). A

whole town wakes up for Jesus.

Matthew is also a master of bold contrasts. His gospel opens with Jesus' birth, and those who lived in expectant hope of the coming Messiah. He writes about Joseph and the wise men. The angel tells Joseph in a dream not to dismiss Mary because a miracle has happened and he's going to play an important role. The wise men in their study of the stars discover a king has been born and they must find Him. God also speaks to them in a dream, and they obey. Their stories are then set alongside the saga of the ruthless King Herod, a thief of a ruler and a small man with a greedy heart who lives to kill, steal and destroy. The contrast couldn't be more vivid. None of these men knew when the birth of Jesus would take place, but Joseph and the wise men give us a picture of what it means to be ready, awake, watchful, and expectant. King Herod, on the other hand, gives us a picture of the opposite of that. Herod attends to his own eating and drinking and his appetite for self. He is fearful and orders unspeakable murders. Matthew delivers a devastating image of Herod. The message? Strive to be like Joseph and the wise men. Steer clear of Herod. In our text, Matthew records Jesus' teaching about his second coming. His message is clear: Jesus will come again. Matthew 24 is thick with apocalyptic language and images, with signs of destruction and false messiahs. The world will get chaotic and dark. There will be suffering and difficulty. What exactly is Jesus talking about ... when will all this happen? And what does it all mean? Is He speaking of the end of the temple (which would happen not too far in the future for them) or is He talking about the final end when Jesus comes back? Well, it's difficult to unravel everything here. Jesus seems to be talking about the end of the temple and the end of time. But it's difficult to tell which one at any given moment. Perhaps it remains deliberately obscure, but the point seems to be this: In the life you live in between the manger and the trumpets, be awake, be alert, stand watch, trust the Lord and look to him. And above all, don't worry about the time. "About that day and hour," Jesus says, "no one knows." (verse 36). When was the last time you didn't worry about time, or told someone else not to worry about it? Dinner is at 6, but don't worry about the time. The show starts at 7:30, but really, don't even think about the time. There are only three Christmas Joy tickets left, but don't worry about rushing out to get one. Your final exam schedules are posted, but don't pay attention to the times. Are you out of your mind? Timing is everything. We need to know when to show up! We live by the clock. Well, most of us anyway. But Jesus couldn't be more clear. Nobody but the Father knows the timing of Jesus' coming. Not the angels, not Jesus Himself. Only the Father. In other words: put your calendars away, silence your watches and don't bother with predictions. You won't know, you can't know, and it's a waste of time to spend time trying to figure out the time. Rather, Jesus says, "be prepared for my coming." It isn't about the timing, it's about attentive living. Don't miss Jesus.

Today we enter Advent: A season to prepare and wait for Jesus' coming, but apparently not to be anxious about the time. Advent stretches across four weeks. Traditionally, the

first Sunday of Advent signals the beginning of our waiting. Our text today reminds us that our whole life is a “waiting time” for Jesus’ return. But we don’t wait passively. There’s work to be done, hope to be built. Jesus says: Keep watch. Stay alert. Stay awake. Be ready. Be prepared. Matthew then points to a series of contrasting figures here. First, in verse 38, he contrasts Noah with everyone else on the planet. We know the story. The world is full of wickedness. But “Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord” (Genesis 6:8). God instructs Noah how to make the ark, what goes in it, which animals he will take, what kind of food. And as if it is the most natural request in the world, Noah does what God asks him to do. No water for miles. No rain cloud in the sky. And we simply read: “And Noah did all the Lord had commanded of him” (Genesis 7:5). Noah heard the Lord and trusted His words; he was awake when everyone else was asleep. Be like Noah. Listen. Obey. Trust.

Matthew then writes about two workers in the field (verse 40), and two women grinding meal (verse 41). Of those four, two are swept away, taken by death, and two are still standing, still working, still in the story. They are somehow prepared for the Lord’s coming. Even though they didn’t know exactly when it would be, they were the ones who kept watch, who were ready, who did their daily work with a watchful eye toward Jesus. Be prepared. Stay awake. Keep watch. Be ready, says Jesus. For us in the Holz house, getting ready and out the door in the morning is nothing short of a minor miracle, every day. Uniforms, backpacks, violin, homework, lunches. Winter coats, swim practice gear, snacks for after school, etc. You know the drill. Most mornings it feels as if we’ve never done this before. Is everybody ready? Voices get a little louder, pushback gets a little stronger. And this is all knowing exactly what time we need to be at school. Every day. There is no mystery in this process. It’s all very clear. You see, it is HARD ENOUGH to get ready for what we know about. Never mind getting ready for something we don’t! But in Matthew 24:44 Jesus says, you must be ready! Dale Bruner translates this verse in this way: “So you, too, must learn to be a ready people, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you are not expecting.” Learn to be a ready people. It takes time to learn to be ready for Jesus’ coming. “It takes time to learn hope” (Dale Bruner). It takes time to learn the strength and stability of Jesus’ love. Don’t miss Jesus.

I’ve already mentioned the Christmas season begins today. Though I suppose that’s debatable. Every year, there’s a cultural tussle over when Christmas actually starts. Costco believes it starts in October. The Hallmark Channel believes it’s in July. The radio stations have no idea—they change the start date from year to year. Starbucks looks at its customer data to pinpoint the day each year they release their Christmas cups. I think we are experiencing the backlash this year of starting ever earlier. Does it start before Halloween? Or right after? Do we even give Thanksgiving a small nod? I hope you did. But listening to Jesus’ words, it’s not ultimately about the moment or the day or the time. We aren’t given the time. You do not know the time. So, I suppose it doesn’t matter when you put your tree up. Or when you start playing Christmas music. Or the exact moment you turn on “A Charlie Brown Christmas” or which version of the

Grinch you prefer. I did see the same study that you saw that those who decorate early for Christmas are happier people. Excellent. Let’s take a scientific poll. Who already has their tree up? Keep up your hand if you are happy. Tim Keller writes in “Hidden Christmas” about the struggle to navigate Christmas in our culture—which results in two different celebrations. There is the giving of gifts, light festivals, families gathering and generously giving to those in need. He writes, “These practices are enriching to everyone, and they are genuinely congruent with the Christian origins of the celebration.” But what Keller fears is happening, that the true roots and foundation of Christmas are becoming increasingly hidden. Our culture cannot locate the anchor point of Christmas. Where do we draw our hope? Keller reminds us that light in the darkness comes from the Christian belief that the world’s hope comes from outside of itself. Giving gifts is our response to the self-giving nature of Jesus who gave everything that we might have eternal life. Our generosity to those in need reflects the truth that Jesus was born into a poor family—the God of the universe identifies with the very least and most vulnerable of the human race. Is Christmas truly in hiding? Faith Hill’s more recent Christmas melody captures the confusion of the cultural moment we are in ... Where are you Christmas? Why can’t I find you? Why have you gone away? Those are great questions. Has Christmas changed? Or have we changed? Has the world changed? Where is Christmas, why can’t we find it? Jesus indicates that Christmas (the coming of Christ) is visible to those who are prepared to receive it, those who are waiting and watching for it. So, how do we prepare? Well, today seems like a good day to start. You see, if Jesus invites us to be prepared for His second coming, then perhaps we look to His first coming to guide us. Christmas, then, is a rehearsal for hope. The season of Christmas teaches us how to wait for the certain return of Jesus.

Today we start our Christmas journey. *My Hope Is Built* is our theme—alluding to the great hymn: My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. It’s a reminder that we don’t have to shape our own hope. We aren’t responsible for creating a meaningful Christmas alone, or manufacturing a holiday season that will carry us through another year. Rather, our hope is built on a foundation strong enough to carry the hopes and fears of all the years, solid enough to bear a weary world, sturdy enough to hold every burden that weighs on your shoulders. Our hope is Jesus, and you will find Him in a manger. Our image for this series is a manger, but not just any manger. A stone manger. The manger that the baby Jesus was laid in was likely a stone manger ... not a wooden one. Looks a bit different than the barnlike scene we’re used to, but the rock is solid. This manger is strong. I look at this and I think (as a mom)—not sure I want to put my newborn in a hard, cold, rough stone structure. But this manger is firm. It is strong. It is immovable. It is solid rock. It is a structure fit for a King. On Christ the solid rock I stand ... all other ground is sinking sand. Back to our passage in Matthew 24. As I’ve studied this passage, I have to admit I’ve been a little overwhelmed. It’s hard not to be. Even visually, this section of Matthew is intimidating on the page. I have a red-letter Bible, which puts Jesus’ words in

red. There are four pages of solid red in this section. This is an intense chapter of Jesus' words. We discover that Jesus is sharing in private with His disciples, His beloved and closest friends. They are asking about the end of the age. There is no conversation. There is no space for questions or interruptions. This is a waterfall of words from Jesus. You can feel His friends listening intently, trying to take it all in, wide-eyed and uncertain about what Jesus is saying. His words continue into chapter 25—parables and images and instructions. How can they possibly absorb it all? Sometimes we come to Scripture and it's not immediately clear or understandable what Jesus is saying. That's okay—we know the Word of God is life, it shapes our hearts and builds our hope even when we aren't sure of what we are reading. We listen. We trust. We walk in the way of Jesus. After several pages of talking to His disciples, Jesus ends with these words: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." This little band of faithful friends and followers is about to enter the deepest suffering they have ever known. They'll watch as Jesus is brutally killed and their hopes and dreams go silent. It's almost as if Jesus is trying to fit the rest of His teaching into a single breath. It's going to get hard and very dark. And it's going to look like I have disappeared forever. Maybe for these moments, they simply need to hear the sound of Jesus' voice. So Jesus talks. And they listen. And then, in our passage today, we hear Him say: Take heart. I am coming back. Rest your hope on the promises of God. The hope we find at the manger is the same hope we carry to the end of the age. God promised to come once (and He did), and He promises to come again (and He will).

Advent is a time set aside each year to rehearse that hope. Advent shapes us as a people waiting expectantly for the promised King, who has come and will come again. So once more, we practice keeping watch with the shepherds, we travel with the wise men into unknown places, we give generously to those in need, we stay awake (literally) on the night before Christmas—just not for Santa, but for the baby who would change the course of the entire world. We worship together in this season with hope and expectation ... for we know the baby will come. We gather in celebration sharing the good news that Christ is born. For God is one who keeps His promises. We Listen. We trust. We obey. I don't know the full range of suffering and sorrow contained in this room today. But I know there is a lot. We all carry heavy burdens. What I want to say to you today is that you don't need to tuck them away for Christmas. For in our suffering, Jesus comes. And He is intimately acquainted with every burden, every grief and every sorrow you carry. And He is strong enough to hold you and me and the whole world which is waiting for a savior. Keep your eyes on Me, says Jesus. Watch for Me. Stay awake. I am going away for a short time, but don't worry about time, for I am with you always until I return. And when He comes with trumpet sound, oh, may I then in Him be found. This Christmas, let's not miss Jesus. Let's learn hope together. Let's be ready at any moment for Jesus to come. May our hearts be ready for Him. Amen.

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## STUDY GUIDE

### MY HOPE IS BUILT • "Hope Beyond Struggle" Matthew 24:36–44

#### **UP:** UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word<sup>1</sup>

Read Matthew 24:36–44.

- 1) How would you define hope? When is hope simply a nice feeling to get you through the day? When is hope something more than this?
- 2) What kinds of things do you typically hope for in life?
- 3) Read Genesis 6:5–9. In verse 5, where did humanity place their hope? How does this compare with where Noah's hope appears to have been placed?
- 4) Read Matthew 24:36–44. How was Noah "keeping watch?" How do Noah's actions inform how we might be called to "keep watch" (verse 42) today?
- 5) This passage is most often tied to the parousia, the second coming or "presence" of Christ. Viewing the passage through this lens, what might you need to do to "be ready" (verse 44) for Christ's return?
- 6) How might this passage encourage you to live more fully into the reality that Jesus is your hope and salvation this Advent?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Many people do not know that Jesus is their hope and salvation. Begin thinking about who you might invite to hear this Good News this Advent season. (Christmas Eve Worship Times are listed at [firstprescos.org/christmas](http://firstprescos.org/christmas).)

#### **IN:** Connect with Each Other

Consider who in your life may need extra encouragement as we enter this holiday season. Take a moment to pray for peace for them, and then write them a letter, send a text message, or call them with some kind of appropriate affirmation.