

Episode 196 Matthew and the “Trauma” of the Parousia

With Jeannine Brown and Carla Dahl

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Jeannine Brown

Hi, I'm Dr. Jeannine Brown and I teach New Testament at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Carla Dahl

Hi, I'm Carla Dahl. And I'm a retired Professor of Pastoral Care and Spiritual Formation from Bethel Seminary and Luther Seminary in Minnesota.

David Capes

Dr. Brown, Dr. Dahl, good to see you both here on *The Stone Chapel Podcast*. Thanks for being part of this. We are face to face at Yarnton because we've had a conference the last few days, looking at some of the pastoral implications of talking about the Parousia. I was struck by your presentation, one as a therapist, and the other as a professor, how well it was knit together by your preparation. I have experienced some of the things you've experienced in the past in regard to the fear and intimidation related to the Parousia (a long time ago). So, I want to talk about it in a minute. But before that, who is Jeannine Brown?

Jeannine Brown

I've been teaching New Testament at Bethel Seminary for over 25 years. And I love that work. I work in the Gospels, particularly in my work, Matthew's Gospel has been a focus. But I'm branching off into some of the letters. And that's been a lot of fun, too. I'm also a translator on the NIV translation team. Most importantly, I am a grandmother to two little ones, Harrison and Daisy. This is the fun part of my life at present.

David Capes

Yes, exactly. Dr. Carla Dahl, what about you?

Carla Dahl

I retired two years ago, and since then have been mainly working in my practice. I've had a psychotherapy practice for about 40 years. And it's a great way to be continuing in my field and to stay active, and I enjoy it so much. I also been doing some research into long distance grand-mothering. I have an eight-year-old grandson who lives about seven hours away from me, and so I'm on the road a lot. And I'm eager to see him every time.

David Capes

So, when's that paper going to be published!

Well, listen, it's a delight to meet you, Carla. I've not met you before. I've known Jeannine for few years now. In fact, I'm using one of your books for my textbook, *The Gospel as Stories*. And so, I'll probably beg you for some help a little bit later on about that. But your paper I thought was very interesting, because you wed the best of both of your disciplines. One as a Gospels writer, and you, Carla, as a therapist, who's probably seen your fair share of trauma. Some of that is religious trauma maybe based upon what we were told, growing up about the Parousia. What was the big idea behind paper?

Jeannine Brown

We looked at Matthew 24 -- 25. And the ways that Matthew 24, particularly has been read as a window into the second coming, into Jesus's return. When much of the chapter, in my view, focuses on the fall of the temple. And it comes out clearly in verse 3, that both things are going to be talked about. And one of the results of that is this felt need to look for signs of Jesus's return. When in 24:36 of Matthew, it's clear that no one knows the time and according to verse 37 it will be like in the days of Noah. It will be that sudden return. So be prepared. So that's the theme. What does it mean to be prepared when we won't necessarily see signs and so we shouldn't be looking for them. What is that preparedness like? That was our setup. And we interacted with our own backgrounds where preparedness was about being really frightened about what might come in a rapture. I had seen *Thief in the Night* in seventh grade.

David Capes

Carla was that your experience too?

Carla Dahl

Yes. We had the impression that we could be left, we could be models for the *Left Behind* series, you know. And so being very anxious about what that would look like. Were we going to be acceptable? Would we be taken? It was anxiety producing.

David Capes

Yes. We talked about the music of Larry Norman. We listen to that in your presentation, which I hadn't heard in so long. I was in a Jesus music band. And that was one of the songs we used to do. Because that was very popular at the time. And it got a lot of response. But it was response based upon fear a lot of times, rather than anything else. We talked in your presentation, a lot about anxiety and the anxiety that we feel and how we feel that. And you were talking about some amazing ideas about how anxiety is both picked up and felt both cognitively, when we're thinking about it, but also on a different level of subconscious, bodily level.

Carla Dahl

Right. And I think that subconscious bodily level is actually more powerful than our cognitions about what's happening. So being able to identify what is going on in my body, that I might not be able to relate to a specific thing in the present moment. Because my anxiety is coming from the past. And so there are some interesting things about our brains. One of those is that our brain scans for danger four times every second. And so we're checking often about whether I am safe.

David Capes

We are not even aware that we are looking for danger.

Carla Dahl

Yes, it's a program running in the background. I wish we would scan for joy four times a second, or scan for beauty four times a second, but we scan for danger. And our nervous system knows something 10 times faster than our prefrontal cortex or our thinking brain. We experience physiologically as whole people, the sense of safety or not. And for me, the operating principles we were talking about in our presentation was for people who have experienced traumatizing events.

Having something come like a thief in the night is not pleasant. If you as a kid had someone sneaking into your bedroom and molesting you at night, you don't want anyone coming in the middle of the night. If you are a kid who was abandoned and just left alone on their own, then being left behind is terrifying. And so being able to think about trauma that comes as event trauma, like combat or natural disaster, is important to tend to. But there's a small "t" trauma that is about developmental contexts that are dangerous, especially early in life. Because that's when we learn what the world is like? Does anybody love me? Does anybody see me? Does anybody care to meet my needs?

And so those things get triggered in some of the ways that we preach or teach about the second coming, about the Parousia. We want to be very careful not to clip those things.

David Capes

Are there other areas that we preach and teach about? I'm not talking about *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* kind of thing. But are there other topics other than Parousia that if we do preach about it, we have a tendency to trigger?

Jeannine Brown

Well, I'm struck by having done some work in Philippians, and talking to people. I had a friend who heard a sermon on Philippians 4. Be anxious for nothing and the strong theme of that sermon was that anxiety is a sin. And yet, in my work on Philippians, in chapter 2, Paul uses anxious language related to his concern for Epaphroditus. He was eventually healed by God. God spared him. But he was very anxious about it and his return to the Philippians Church relieved their anxiety, in fact. So normalizing anxiety, which is something I think Carla has talked about, would be really helpful, even as we preach on, texts that are about anxiety. And I think exhortations to be "perfect, as God is perfect". You know, that just creates a whole lot of anxiety for people who are raised in a really rigid, rule bound systems, or who live in those now.

David Capes

And are told all the time that you don't measure up. The parents told you that, your husband, your wife tells you you're not measuring up. You never do. And so that kind of a bullying attitude happens. So then our image of God becomes one of a celestial bully.

Jeannine Brown

And that's where Carla's words to me a couple months ago, as she spoke to them in our conference really resonated these last couple days. I'm not going to steal your thunder so Carla can tell us about it.

Carla Dahl

Our anxiety about these kinds of issues, I think comes partly from our God representations. Who do we imagine is going to reappear? Is it someone who's safe, loving and welcoming? Is it someone who's harsh, punitive or aloof? I think, especially for ministry leaders, we will introduce people to the God we imagine. We need to be really careful about our God representations. Know that they have been shaped by our past experiences, by past relationships, not just parents. That's a common misconception that we see God like we saw our parents. But the communities that we live in, the communities that hold us either safely or not. This is where I think congregations have a fabulous opportunity to offer some healing experiences for people who actually were raised in an environment or who live in an environment now, where the God we imagine is not a relational God, is not a loving God. And that's going to be something we just experienced again, in that embodied way. We may not think it. I might know all the good doctrine and all the good theology in my head.

David Capes

I'll be able to do it and talk about it. But at the end of the day, I'm feeling that from my neck down. Because something's not right. And there's something that's not right about me. I'm not right. You looked at Matthew 24 and 25. And you said earlier that the first part of that whole section is really about what's going to happen between the time that Jesus gave that sermon and the destruction of the temple in AD 70. But then there comes a moment where Jesus turns to the coming of the Son of Man.

Jeannine Brown

Yes. (Matt) 24:36 and following. He uses the term Parousia, which is the Greek term for "appearing". And in that context of Jesus appearing, it's what we would call the Second Coming or Jesus's return. And he starts to talk about it in different kinds of terms, than he's talked previously. About how we will know, how people will know the fall of the temple will be approaching. He starts to talk about its suddenness. And the need to always be prepared, to always be ready.

And then there are a number of parables that come that help us. There's the parable of the 10 young women who are waiting for a groom to appear for a wedding. And the readiness theme really gets raised there and reaffirmed as the beginning of chapter 25. And then the parable of three slaves who await their master. Two of them invest, (and it's about money, a talent is money) and they invest really well. And the last one does not. They hide it in the ground. And the theme of that is about faithfulness. You have done what is right, good and faithful slave or servant. That language comes up for the first two. So we hear that preparedness for Christ's return is about faithfulness in that daily task God calls us to. Then the final parable, the parable of the sheep and the goats. The final judgment scene is really then to show us, what faithfulness looks like. And it's about really tangible gifts, tangible acts of kindness, and solidarity with those who have the least. They're called the least, which is a status term in Matthew. And we're to show mercy and justice to those least ones, surprisingly whom Jesus is with. So that is kind of surprising,

David Capes

It's like they are participating in him already. They're already in Christ.

Jeannine Brown

They were doing these things. And they didn't know it was for Jesus. But Jesus says, I was there. When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it for me. It really grounds the whole of what's called eschatological discourse of Matthew 24 through 25. And especially the Parousia teachings, in this idea of readiness by living faithfully in the moment, day to day. We talked in the end about, do we live faithfully, are we ready, by looking at the skies trying to find signs of the times? Or are we faithful or ready by just doing what God has called us to in the moment and caring for those around us and living out the mission mandate of Matthew. That's very robust and very fully orbled.

Carla Dahl

And I think what's interesting about that from our anxiety perspective, is that if we have had the unfortunate experience of experiencing a lot of trauma, or of being abandoned or neglected, then surprises are not pleasant for us. And Jeannine has talked about surprise especially with the sheep and the goats story. And don't ever throw me a surprise party!

David Capes, Jeanine Brown, Carla Dahl

No, we don't want it! No surprise party.

Carla Dahl

Because surprise is not pleasant for me, given my own history. So how would I be ready? Would I watch the skies? I will do that if I'm hyper-vigilant. And hyper-vigilance is an extreme form of anxiety, where we are always watching for what could hurt us. Even more than the regular human, with the scanning for danger thing that just keeps us safe. This idea that I'm going to be in danger is difficult to manage for us as humans. And so being hyper-vigilant, hyper-ready, hyper-prepared for everything becomes a way of coping with that anxiety and that fear.

David Capes

What I'm hearing Jeannine say is: the way that we are vigilant is through faithfulness. Acts of faith, daily.

Jeannine Brown

Daily, mundane things but significant things. To be in solidarity with those who have needs, who are the lowly. So that takes our focus away from waiting for Jesus and seeing Jesus to seeing Jesus in those around us, that we can minister to.

David Capes

So, seeing Jesus before we see Jesus.

Jeannine Brown

Yes. Well, that fits Matthew, really well. "I will be with you" is a key theme in Matthew 1:22-24 (cf. Matt 28:18-20). Jesus is with us. And yet we still await Jesus. That was one of the themes of our symposium that was so wonderful to pay attention to; the ways Jesus is with us. And we don't have to discount that to say we still await the Parousia.

David Capes

In this particular symposium, we had about 13 or 14 papers, which were very good. We hope those will become a book. And in the near future, we'll say more about that. But particularly, I hope you will pull together your chapter and make that a contribution to our book. But we are grateful that you're with us today here on The Stone Chapel Podcasts. Thanks, Dr Jeannine Brown and thanks Dr Carla Dahl.

Carla Dahl

Your Welcome.

Jeanine Brown

Thank you.