

The Signs of the Times

Matthew 24:1-14

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Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

3 As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" 4 And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

9 "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matt 24:1-14)

An article initially caught my attention last week because of its title: "Loose Christian Movement Says End of Days in May." MSNBC.com featured a story on the followers of Harold Camping who hosts a radio program and website, and who believes that the Bible teaches a very specific day in which Christ will return¹. Camping's followers have started a billboard and promotional campaign called "We Can Know" in which they are publicizing the date of the rapture of the church: May 21, 2011. The problem is that Harold Camping has issued a similar warning before. He predicted that the rapture would happen on September 6, 1994. And it didn't. Yet Camping has received a great deal of attention in recent days, being featured on Time.com, the Associated Press, and a blog for NPR.

The interest in Camping, despite his previous erroneous predictions, illustrates the fact that it isn't hard to attract a crowd when one begins talking about the "End Times." In fact, some of the best-selling books have been about the end of the world. Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* would be a great example in the 1970's and the *Left Behind* book series which featured 16 books by LaHaye and Jenkins from 1995-2007 would be another. Teaching

¹ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40889267>

or talking about the end times is sure to attract a significant level of interest because I think that most people are, in varying ways, curious as to what the Bible says about the End Times.

Introducing the End

Today we begin a short series on Matthew 24-25 which I'm calling "The End is Near." This section of Scripture is often called the Olivet Discourse because Jesus delivers this teaching while on the Mount of Olives. Now we've been studying Matthew for the last year and a half, and today is the fifty-sixth message in the series. The plan is to spend the next 5 weeks on Matthew 24-25, spend 9 weeks on the Passion of Jesus, and then wrap up our study of Matthew around Easter.

The Olivet Discourse is the fifth and final collection of teachings that Matthew will give us, and it takes place just prior the darkest and most redemptive moment in human history: the crucifixion of Jesus. After cleansing the temple and a growing conflict with the religious rulers, Jesus leaves the city of Jerusalem, and begins to prepare his disciples for what is coming:

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, 2 "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified" (Matt 26:1-2).

This passage is loaded with powerful, alarming, and confusing content. Jesus warns his disciples about traumatic events, false teachers, and the desertion of some followers. He tells them about a season of great hardship (24:9-14), the horrific defiling of the temple (abomination of desolations, Matt 24:15-28), and about his Second Coming (24:29-31). The section is filled with numerous encouragements to spiritual wisdom, watchfulness, faithfulness, and trustworthiness (see 24:10-14, 24:44, 25:1-13, 25:14-30). And it ends with a warning about the final judgment which includes the famous statement, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto me" (25:40).

The Olivet Discourse is an important conclusion to Jesus's teaching ministry, and it marks the beginning of the end of his earthly ministry while foreshadowing, predicting, and warning his disciples and us about what is coming in the future.²

Questions about the Future

Our text begins in verse one with a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. As they were leaving the temple, the disciples made a comment about the temple area and its buildings. My

² One's approach to the Olivet Discourse is fairly important. There are some (preterists) who hold that most or all of the predictions were fulfilled in the lifetime of the disciples (e.g., R.C. Sproul). Others (futurist) see the events as entirely future, holding that everything Jesus talks about has a future fulfillment (e.g., MacArthur). Another position (mine to date) sees partial or near-far fulfillment in which more than one event could fit into the prophetic prediction (e.g., Carson, Turner).

guess is that they were pointing out the beauty and splendor their center of worship. And it certainly would have been an impressive sight to behold. However, when you set their comment in the context of what Jesus is thinking about – his impending suffering and crucifixion - it must have been quite a contrast. Jesus is about to experience the full wrath of a holy God and make a one-for-all atonement for sins; he is about to usher in the new covenant that has been promised for generations. And the disciples are enamored with the beauty of their worship facilities. Therefore, Jesus shocks their minds by telling them about the destruction of the temple: "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Matt 24:2). This prophecy came true in 70 AD when the Romans razed the temple after a Jewish revolt.

Jesus's statement must have been disturbing and shocking. It led to a follow-up question from the disciples when they arrived at the Mount of Olives. They ask him for clarification in verse three: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" They ask two questions: 1) "When will the destruction of the temple happen?" and 2) "What will be the sign that the end is near?" ("of your coming and of the close of the age"). These two questions inform Jesus's answer in the following verses.

However, as you read on in the rest of chapter 24 you will find that discerning the answer to those questions is not entirely clear. In fact, I think it is safe to say that this chapter is one of the most challenging chapters to understand in the entire Bible. Jesus certainly does give some answers to the "when" and "what" questions, but it seems to me that the purpose for his statement was not to give a hard and fast timeline; it was to encourage his disciples (and those to whom Matthew has written) to spiritual watchfulness and discernment. I think that Jesus wanted his disciples to look beyond the temporary buildings in Jerusalem, and I think that his explanation, like most apocalyptic literature, is a bit veiled. One commentary said it very well:

Jesus is concerned not so much with the "when?" and the "what?" of these events as he is with the "so what?" Although 24:4-35 speaks to some extent about the when and the what, it does so with relative brevity and imprecision. Jesus speaks at more length and detail in 24:36-25:45 about the alertness, trustworthiness, and compassion that will be required of his disciples until he comes. In a word, they are concerned about when he will renew his presence with them, and he is concerned about how they will live in his absence.³

I think that this is a very important and informative starting point for examining this section of Scripture, but it also raises some cautions I want to give you when studying the End Times.

³³ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 570.

4 of 5 Cautions in Studying the End Times

Over the next few weeks, I'll do my best to walk you through what I think that these passages are saying, but I want to share a few big picture cautions from a pastoral perspective that I hope will serve like points on a compass for navigating through this challenging text.

1. Be careful not to err by being too lackadaisical or too chronological

As with the study of any subject in the Bible, there are ditches to avoid on both sides of the journey. The first is being too lackadaisical, which means that you might live as if the return of Christ either doesn't matter or isn't going to happen, thus causing you to be too focused on this present life. The second error would be to study this subject and become overly fascinated with the chronology or the fulfillment of certain events. There certainly is a chronology here but it is not the main focus. The first danger is one of passivity and the other danger is becoming overly predictive. A lackadaisical attitude leads to a dangerous attachment to this life, and a chronological focus can lead to an equally dangerous detachment from our mission in this world (e.g., "Who cares what happens in our country, the Lord is coming soon anyway.")

2. Be careful to approach this text with awe and mystery, not just curiosity

By saying this, I'm not suggesting that curiosity is bad. But I am saying that curiosity without awe and mystery makes the Bible more of a handbook on future events and less of the revelation of God. It has too often been the case the people study the book of Revelation to figure out the end of the world, and they forget that the Revelation's message is that when the smoke of history clears, one person is standing victorious: Jesus Christ. The last of the books of the Bible is not "the revelation of future events"; it is "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:1). So if you study Matthew 24 and find yourself with awe and a fair amount of mystery – take heart. I think that you are getting what was intended.

3. Be careful to see what presuppositions you bring to the text

I think it is really important to recognize that every one of us brings a set of presuppositions to texts about the End Times. In other words, what we see in the minutia of Matthew 24 is very much informed not only by what the text says but also our theological grid that we bring to the text. In some respects it has to be this way because Matthew 24 is only one of many passages that talk about the End Times. A complete view of the End Times could never be built on one passage alone. This is the discipline called Systematic Theology, the organizing of the collective teaching of scripture into a particular system for clarity and understanding. However, the challenge is the fact that our systems of theology develop through the study of Scripture and through those who have taught us, and sometimes it is hard for some to acknowledge how much what they see in a text is informed by their system. In other words, the church you grew up in, where you went to school, what your family believed, and how you were taught really

effects what you see here. My caution is here is nothing more than for you to see that what you see is informed by more than what you might think. And I think it is helpful to simply acknowledge this reality as we approach this subject.

4. Be careful to get the order of importance right

Another very important thing to consider is the order of importance as it relates to the End Times. Or let me state it bluntly: "who is an End Times heretic?" We need to think this through or we'll be quickly guilty of attacking the wrong enemy or making light of things that are truly important. I would answer my own question ("who is an end times heretic?") by saying that I don't believe that you be a true follower of Jesus is you don't believe that Jesus is coming back. In other words, believing in the Second Coming of Christ is a fundamental of the faith. Everything beyond that is an "intramural" discussion. In other words, while my view of the end times would be premillennial, I am certain that amillennialists and post-millennialists are a part of the family of God. And while I am very convinced of the Second Coming of Christ, convinced of the premillennial return I think that there is even more flexibility as to the nature of the tribulation and the reality or timing of the rapture. In other words, **when** a person believes Christ is coming is far less important than **if** he believes Christ is coming. When studying the End Times, we just need to be sure that we know the order of importance of these issues lest we spend too much time on the wrong things and not enough time on the right things. I have often said that spiritual maturity is not just what you know; it is knowing what is important. And that applies to the study of the End Times.

Now there is one more caution, but I want to save it for the end of the message because it is informed by what we find next in Matthew 24.

Warnings and Promises

Verses 4-14 feature a series of warnings and promises which Jesus gives in answer to the disciple's questions regarding when Jerusalem will be destroyed and what will be the signs of Jesus coming and the end of the age.

Warning #1 – Be watchful for deceiving, false messiahs (vv 4-5)

Jesus's first warning is in regard to those who would come and claim to be "the Christ," which is a phrase used to describe the Messiah. He warns them that many will be led astray. Therefore, he calls on them to be aware, to take heed, and to continually be on guard against those who will come and try and deceive them. 1 John 2:18 says, "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour."

Warning #2 – Be ready for disturbing events (vv 6-8)

Jesus next warns them about human and cosmic disasters that will characterize their experience in life. He talks specifically about national tension, wars, famine, and earthquakes. It as though the culture and environment of the planet earth begins to writhe under the effects of sin and portend something that is to come. These events indicate that the presence of the "last days." However, they do not indicate the actual end, and the disciples are encouraged not to be alarmed: "See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet" (v 6). Instead, they are to view this season as "the beginning of birth pains" (v 8). In other words, these events set the stage more significant and foreboding events yet to come.

Warning #3 – Be spiritually prepared for hardship (vv 9-12)

The third warning focuses on the spiritual threats that they will experience. Persecution will take place at a level that they have not experienced to date. The ESV translates the word Jesus uses here as "tribulation" which is a word that can also be translated as "afflicted, anguish, burden, and persecution." That is why the NIV renders it "to be persecuted" and the KJV renders it "to be afflicted." Some take this passage to refer to the time period known as the Great Tribulation, and that season may fit the tone of this passage. But it seems to me that, given the context, Jesus has in view something that the disciples will personally experience. The Great Coming Tribulation will certainly be like this and at an intensified level, but this seems to have near-term fulfillment with long-term fulfillment implications (similar to Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 7:14 in reference to the birth of Jesus – a real historical event in the past with predictive elements later fulfilled).

The disciples needed to be ready for a coming season in which they will be delivered to death and hated by all nations for the sake of Christ (v 9). They needed to heed the warning that the effect of this affliction would be that many under the press of persecution will fall away, betray each other, and hate each other (v 10). And the lingering effect of the environment of lawlessness will be that the love of many will grow cold.

Gratefully the passage is not only filled with warnings; it also contains two important promises:

Promise #1 – Endurance is possible and will be rewarded

After giving so much bad and disturbing news about false messiahs, cosmic events, persecution, and even the falling away of some disciples, Jesus says, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (v 13). This is a familiar theme, particularly in the context of suffering. Endurance through suffering is often offered as a hopeful command.

10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. **Be faithful unto death**, and I will give you the crown of life (Rev 2:10).

Throughout the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, Jesus frequently exhorts and encourages spiritual endurance:

- "to him who overcomes, I will give right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7- NIV)
- "he who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death" (Rev 2:11- NIV)
- "to him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna" (Rev 2:17 - NIV)
- "to him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations" (Rev 2:26 - NIV)
- "he who overcomes will...be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels (Rev 3:5 - NIV)
- "he who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name" (Rev 3:12 - NIV)
- "to him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev 3:21 - NIV)

And this theme of overcoming (conquering – ESV) is even found at the very end of the story of redemption in Revelation 21.

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 **He who overcomes will inherit all this**, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 **But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death"** (Rev 21:5-8 - NIV).

So it is clear that spiritual endurance, sustained by God's preserving power (see Phil 1:6, 2:13), is both promised and rewarded.

Promise #2 – God's mission will not be stopped

The final promise is both a promise and a prediction. You might think with all the turmoil, suffering, and hardship thrown at the followers of Jesus that the mission of God in the world could be stopped. However, Jesus comforts his disciples with the news that even though there is great suffering, apostasy, and trial, God's mission will not be thwarted. Therefore, Jesus

says: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). Even in the darkest moment of all of human history, we can be sure that God's purposes will always be accomplished.

Three warnings and two promises, and when you put them all together you get a clear picture that Jesus is doing more than just identifying facts about what is coming. He has a spiritual lesson in view here. And that leads us to the one caution we left to the end.

The 5th Caution: Be careful to keep the admonitions about watchfulness front and center

The final caution really is the most important and represents the main thrust of what I want you to hear today. In the midst of all that we do not know regarding the specifics of what Matthew is saying here, one thing is very clear: Jesus is calling for spiritual perseverance in the face of future difficult events.

He is calling his disciples and us to look at the future – both the near and distant future – through the lens of spiritual readiness and watchfulness. Matthew 24 begs us to ask ourselves questions like:

- Do I have a personal relationship with this Jesus who will come again?
- Am I overly attached to this present life?
- Am I ready to suffer in significant and small ways for the cause of Christ?
- Do I live with a sense of eternal urgency?
- Do I live with a deep-seated trust that God's purposes, while confusing, are always right on plan?

Martin Luther faced such difficulties and challenges in his lifetime. He faced the real possibility of dying for the name of Christ. And it was during this moment that he wrote:

*Did we in our strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.*

May God help us to hear the historic call to be watchful, vigilant, and righteous while longing for the day when Christ wins the final battle!

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