

Mount of Olives:

A Three-Point Sermon on What in the World Will Happen

Scripture Readings: Zephaniah 1:7-18; **Matthew 24:1-44 (text)**

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Introduction

“There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born. Firmly established already in his early years, he will, after reaching maturity, achieve supreme power.”

“At no time in the history of the Christian Church have the conditions necessary to the Lord’s return been so completely fulfilled as at the present time.”

Who said the above quotes and when? Most would be surprised that the above were written by Martin of Tours about 300 A.D. and Clarence Larkin in 1918 in that order.

Every generation from the time of Jesus until today, 2,000 years later believes they are the “terminal generation” before the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. Especially after the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948, speculations mounted as to the nearness of endtime events. In 1980, Hal Lindsey wrote, “*We are the generation that will see the end times... and the return of Jesus.*” In 1988, Edgar Whisenant wrote a booklet entitled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will be in 1988*, saying, “I would stake my life” on it, because he imagined that a Biblical generation is 40 years long, and 1988 is 40 years after Israel was reborn as a nation. Thus, we are now very close to the “last days,” he argued. *88 Reasons* sold 4.5 million copies, but his later false prophecy books in 1989, 1993 and 1994 generated very little excitement. This boy cried wolf too many times!

This is the view of majority of evangelicals, popularized by Tim LaHaye (*Understanding the Last Days*), Hal Lindsey (*The Terminal Generation; Israel and the Last Days*), Greg Laurie (*Are We Living in the Last Days?*), John Hagee (*Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days*), and Robert Lightner (*Last Days Handbook*). They teach that the “last days” will start only a few years before the return of Christ, against the clear apostolic teaching that the “last days” started when Christ first came 2,000 years ago (Acts 2:17; 1 Cor 10:11; 1 Tim 4:1; Heb 1:2, 9:26; 1 Pet 1:20; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18).

Like all false prophets dating back 2,000 years ago, from Montanus (150) to Melchior Hoffman (1533) to William Miller (1843-4), all of the current false prophets believe that ours is the “terminal generation.”

This is one of the errors in the interpretation of Biblical prophecy: *futurism*. Futurists interpret almost all New Testament prophecies with a view to the future, for example, Matthew 24. However, we will see that although futurists concede that verses 1-2 are about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, they interpret the rest of the chapter as events reserved for the future end times.

The other error is quite the reverse of futurism, and one that is not very well-known: *preterism*. According to *full* preterists, all the prophecies in Matthew 24 were all fulfilled in A.D. 70 when Roman armies sacked Jerusalem and destroyed its Temple, including the verses that talk about the Second Coming. Partial preterists, meanwhile, conclude that all the events in the chapter have already been accomplished, except for the Second Coming.

How then should we go about studying Matthew 24 in order not to fall into these two traps? There are several vital keys in the interpretation of Matthew 24 and even Matthew 25.

First, these prophecies sometimes have double, even triple, fulfillment. They have been fulfilled in the past, even before the time of Jesus, but this fulfillment is but a shadow of a still future and wider fulfillment in Christ and the church.

For example, about 500 B.C., the prophet Daniel prophesied the appearance of “[one who makes desolate] on the wings of abominations” (Dan 9:27). Jews believe that Daniel’s prophecy was fulfilled by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C. when he invaded Jerusalem, entered the Temple, and erected an altar to the Greek god Zeus and sacrificed pigs and other unclean animals in the Temple. But it was fulfilled again in A.D. 70, just as Jesus prophesied, when Roman legions sacked Jerusalem and entered the Temple with their pagan symbols and then destroyed it completely. Both of these events were in the past, but there will be a future third event still waiting to come to pass: the “man of lawlessness” who “takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess 2:4), the so-called Antichrist who will “utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling” (Rev 13:6). This world power, the final “abomination of desolation” in Daniel’s prophecy, would appear on the scene shortly before Jesus returns.

The second important key to unlocking these verses is that *the New Testament interprets the Old, so that Old Testament prophecies that talk about the future of Israel is reinterpreted in the New Testament as being fulfilled by Christ and his church.* In Matthew 24:31, Jesus prophesies of the great gathering of his people at his return:

“And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

This gathering is foretold by the Old Testament prophets, one of them in Isaiah 27:13:

“And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.”

On the day of Christ’s return, a great trumpet call will sound for the gathering of all the elect—the Israel of God, which is the Church (Gal 6:16)—from all Gentile nations of the world represented by Assyria and Egypt. Then they will come to a great assembly, “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” to worship God and Christ (Heb 12:22).

The last essential key, which is directly relevant to our text, is that *all of Matthew 24-25 is Jesus’ response to his disciples’ three questions.* These chapters were not just random talk by Jesus about the last days, but are a long discourse on his answers to three questions that the disciples asked him.

I. “When Will These Things Happen?”

This first question refers back to his prophecy about the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in verses 1 and 2. When will this happen? Jesus gives several signs to watch out for.

In the previous chapter, Matthew 23, Jesus pronounced seven woes or curses on Israel, symbolized by the city of Jerusalem, because they have broken God’s covenant in their unfaithfulness and rebellion. Jesus foretold that God will finally settle his account against the Jews,

“See, your house is left to you desolate” (verse 38). For sure, he knew what Isaiah prophesied centuries before him, of which the Jews certainly knew as well, *“Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins”* (Isa 64:11; cf Jer 12:7).

Jesus warned his disciples that when they see “the abomination of desolation” standing in the holy place, they must flee to the mountains outside of Jerusalem. In Luke, he gives the same warning when they see Jerusalem surrounded by foreign armies, *“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains”* (Luke 21:20-21).

The destruction will be so sudden and complete that he warned them to be in haste to flee the city, as Lot and his family were also told to quickly escape before Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God. It will be so terrible that if God did not intervene, no one would be left alive in the city. This is why Jesus says that the suffering will be so great that nothing like it has ever happened in Israel's history and will ever happen again. Tens of thousands of Jews were massacred by the Romans. The Temple was torn down completely; not one stone was left upon another. The whole city was leveled down and plowed with salt by the Romans, effectively wiping Jerusalem off the map.

What are the other signs? First, there will be false prophets and false Christs. Even during the time of the apostles, they already came. As early as Acts 8, Peter and John already encountered a false prophet and magician named Simon. False prophets deceived the church in Thessalonica that the Second Coming of Christ had already come (2 Thess 2:1-2). The apostle John wrote that many antichrists, those who deny that Jesus is the Christ, had already come during his time, which is the last hour (1 John 2:18). And these false prophets and false Christs multiplied as the time approached.

Second, although there are signs that point to the coming destruction of Israel, it will also be sudden, unexpected and quick, like a lightning. It will not be a secret. As everyone can see lightning, so will the destruction be visible to all. As everyone can see vultures hovering over dead bodies from miles away, so the dead will be scattered for miles around.

When will the destruction come? First, when the city is surrounded by armies. Second, when the Temple is desecrated. Third, when false prophets and false Christs multiply. In exacting detail, all of Jesus' prophecies about the destruction of the city and the Temple were fulfilled by the Roman legions and by Christians fleeing to the mountains of Perea.

II. “What will be the Sign of Your Coming?”

This second question is answered by Jesus in verses 4-14. The disciples wanted to know when Jerusalem and its Temple will be destroyed. For them, this destruction coincides with the Second Coming, and this Second Coming will be the end of the world.

We already see this thinking in the Old Testament. The Day of the Lord, or the end of the world, is described in terms of cosmic cataclysm. In Zephaniah 1:15, it is described as *“a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.”* In Joel 2:30-31, it will be a day of *“wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood.”*

To the prophets, the destruction of nations and kings is the catastrophic end of the world when the cosmos will be in upheaval. The destruction of Israel is a day when God “*will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight*” (Amos 8:9). For Isaiah, Babylon’s fall would be when “*the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light*” (Isa 13:10).

Did these cosmic upheavals literally happen when those nations fell? Obviously, they did not, but the disciples made the connection between the three end time events as explained by Jesus.

Thus, their next question is about his return: “What will be the sign of your coming?” Jesus tells them of several precursors: false Christs, apostasy or falling away from the faith, wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and gospel preaching to all nations. But these signs have been present in the world for 2,000 years now since the beginning of the New Testament. This is why most of the New Testament writers tell us that the last days started in the first coming of Christ.

Thus, as he was describing the fearsome events and turmoil of the close of the age, Jesus qualified them, saying, “*For this must take place, but the end is not yet... All these are but the beginning of the birth pains*” (Matt 24:6b, 8). The destruction of the Temple is not the end, but just the beginning of birth pangs. If these signs are likened to birth pangs, they are to continue until the end of the world’s “labor,” intensifying in severity with the progress of the “birth” process. Even the preaching of the gospel will increase, such that it “*will be proclaimed throughout the whole world... and then the end will come*” (Matt 24:14).

Although verses 15-28 are signs that point towards the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, we see from worldwide historical events from the first century that they are also a miniature of much more severe birth pains that lead up to the end of the age. And the end of the age is signaled by the Second Coming of Christ.

So beginning with verse 29, Jesus tells of events “immediately” after these birth pains and which also precede his coming, “*Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*” As in the fall of nations and kings in the Old Testament, his return will be marked by cosmic upheaval, but this time they will be real and literal, for this is also the end of the world.

Jesus reveals in verses 30-31 that his coming will not be a secret; it will be with power and great glory, in the clouds of heaven, and all the people of the earth will mourn because they know it is Judgment Day. He will come with a loud trumpet blast that serves as a signal to all the inhabitants of the earth that the King of Kings has arrived. All the elect from all over the world will be gathered by his angels.

III. “What will be the Sign of the End of the Age?”

If the last days have been with us since the first century, then whenever the New Testament talks about the characteristics of the last days, we should expect these same characteristics to be present today as they were present in the first century.

The “desolation of abomination spoken of by the prophet Daniel” is a foreshadow of the “man of lawlessness,” the Antichrist. He is the last of the many antichrists would proclaim himself as God,

dominate the world, persecute and martyr believers, all of which will result in a great falling away (2 Thess 2:3; cf Rev 13:5-8). A great tribulation, false christs and false prophets—signs which precede the Temple destruction—also precede the close of the age, but with much more severity and intensity.

This is why the New Testament writers warned first century believers about the nature of the last days. Paul warned that false teachers will seduce some to “depart [fall away] from the faith” in “later times” (1 Tim 4:1); ungodliness and unrighteous will be pervasive in the difficult “last days” (2 Tim 3:1). John says that his days is “the last hour” marked by many antichrists (1 John 2:18). Scoffers will mock the faithful in the “last time” (Jude 18). All throughout history since the first coming of Christ, we know that all of these tribulations were present like birth pangs, and will be with us until the last day of the present last days.

But these signs do not tell us that the return of Jesus is “imminent” or can happen any moment now. Paul tells us in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, “*For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed.*” Two unmistakable events that must first take place before the last day comes: (1) a great apostasy, and (2) the appearing of the Antichrist.

Thus, at Christ’s first coming to sacrifice himself, the last days were inaugurated, but the consummation at his second coming—*the last day of the last days*—still awaits. Christ warns all his disciples—from the first to the present century—not to speculate when that day or hour will be, but that we are to keep watch because no one knows (Matt 24:36, 42).

When that hour comes, Christ will return, and all the cosmic upheaval that he prophesied will come upon the world because the cup of God’s wrath on man’s rebellion against him is full. The Spirit also inspired Peter to write about the same fiery, cataclysmic events that mark the end of the age, when “the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!” (2 Peter 3:12)

According to Old Testament writers, “the day of the Lord” is a day of judgment and destruction, but also of restoration ((Isa 2:12; Joel 2:1, 31; Amos 5:18; Zeph 1:7, 14; Mal 4:5). But the apostles also equated “the day of the Lord” with the day of Christ’s return, calling it “the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5) or “the day of our Lord Jesus” (2 Cor 1:14; see also 1 Cor 1:8; Phil 1:6, 2:16), the day when he appears (2 Tim 4:18), judges all people and inaugurates eternity.

Conclusion

So what if Christ is coming? If we don't know when he's coming, we can “eat, drink, be merry” because the end of the world will not come in our lifetime. But this careless living is exactly what Jesus and the New Testament writers warn us against with urgency and solemnity. How are we to live in this present age while the Lord tarries?

First, we are to be watchful and ready. When we see a tree starting to bear fruit, we know that summer is coming. So also when we see the signs of the end of the age intensifying in both severity and frequency, we know that the Master is at the very gates of the world, ready to come in. The Bible is not telling us a story to scare us, but it is God's eternal word of truth; everything it says will happen—will happen. We are to wait for our blessed hope, the appearing of our Savior, and for the new heavens and a new earth where we will dwell with God for eternity (2 Peter 3:12-13; Tit 2:13).

Be ready, because no one knows the day nor the hour of his coming. Are you ready for Judgment Day? Your end of the world might come at any moment, for you don't know when God will require you of your soul. When this day comes—and it surely comes for every human being in the world—there will be no more second chances of being purged of sins in the age to come, because “*it is appointed for man to die once... after that comes judgment*” (Heb 9:27). He has offered himself once as a sacrifice to bear the sins of all his people. When he returns, he will not deal with sin anymore, because he has dealt with it once for all when he died on the cross. Instead, his return will be the day of rewarding all his servants who were eagerly waiting for him.

Second, we are to live godly and righteous lives. Paul tells us that we are to “*renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age*” (Tit 2:12). Since we have been redeemed by Christ from all lawlessness and purified us from all our sins, we are to be zealous for good works (Tit 2:14). Those wicked servants who gloat over the delay of the Master and live evil lives, dealing unlovingly with their neighbor, and are continuing in gluttony and drunkenness, the Master “will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites” in eternal fire, where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 24:48-51).

Third, we are to declare to one another and to unbelieving family and friends all these things: God’s love for the world in Christ, godly living while we wait and hope for his return in glory (Tit 2:15). But we are also to warn unrepentant sinners of the coming Judgment Day at his return.

Are you eagerly waiting for Christ’s return? Judgment Day for you will be a day of rejoicing. Or do you not care about his coming and live ungodly and unrighteous lives? Judgment Day for you will be a day of mourning.

“Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!” Amen.