

Introduction:

A. In the little country church I grew up in one of the highlights in those days was the prophecy conference. A speaker would come—Dr. Somebody—and he’d have this huge chart about the End Times which was stretched across the front of the church. It was wonderfully complex but he’d walk us through it, night after night. We ate it up. The trumpets, seals, the dragon, Gog & Magog, the rapture!

Today, there’s something of a backlash to that kind of thing, especially among younger believers, because they feel Christians got carried away, if you’ll pardon the eschatological expression. A lot of seminarians have almost no sense of eschatology—the Doctrine of Last Things. They’re like the guy who says, “All I know is that Jesus wins in the end.” Well, we need to know more than that!

B. Turn to **Matt 24**. It was the last week of Jesus’ life. In this scene he is leaving the temple, heavy-hearted. In **Mt.23:37-39** he said, *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* Which is exactly what they had said a few days before at his triumphal entry. Having rejected Christ, Jerusalem was desolate.

C. So going on into **ch 24**: *Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”* Perhaps you’ve

seen the huge stones of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Those were the kinds of stones he was pointing to. Hard to believe such destruction could be coming.

A little later, *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"* Oh, that is the million-dollar question isn't it? **When?** Actually, notice that this is two questions. I think the disciples assumed it was different angles on the same one, but as you'll see Jesus' answered it as two distinct questions. This chapter is Jesus' answer so we're going to work through it.

One of the things you learn studying the gospels is that when someone asks Jesus a question, his answers don't always match the question. Here's a case in point. Their question was, "*When,*" but Jesus answer was, "*Watch out that no one deceives you.*"

I. DISCIPLES ASK JESUS, "WHEN?" BUT HE REPLIES, "WATCH OUT!" (24:4-14)

- A. What are we watching out for? Deception. You know how the news will run stories every once in a while about the latest telephone or internet con, telling us what to watch for? The nature of a con is that it is believable. You don't have to be an idiot to fall for it, but you are an idiot if you think you can't be fooled! Here Jesus warns his disciples—that includes us—of the deceptions we will face.

V.5, "*For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many.*" Some of these false messiahs, obviously, will be very convincing, especially among the Jews, apparently, since Gentiles aren't very tuned to the idea of the Messiah.

Vv.6-7, “*You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.*” That’s our world, of course! These things are deceptive because they feel so apocalyptic. They seem like the end of the world. “The sky is falling” so people think the end times have come.

- B. Then Jesus says in **v.8**, “*All these are the beginning of birth pains.*” What’s being born? The kingdom of God is being born in the filthy stable of this world, but the birth is painful, particularly to the church. Look at **vv.9-14**.

V.9, “*Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.*” As quickly as the gospel spreads, so spreads persecution. According the **Open Doors**, a ministry to the persecuted church, during 2018 *each month* 322 Christians were killed for their faith, 214 churches and Christian properties were destroyed, and 722 forms of violence were committed against Christians. *Each month!*

V.10, “*At that time many will turn away from the faith and betray and hate each other.*” An often unspoken Christian reality is that, under pressure, many who profess Christ turn away from the faith, and not only that, they tear at the very fabric of the church with their betrayal and hate. They are the enemy within. There are people here who have suffered in churches experiencing this.

V.11, “*...and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.*” Prophets supposedly deliver the word of the Lord with God-given authority. They’re *believable*. And the idea here is that their teaching tears people, not only from orthodox teachings, but from trusting Jesus alone. They don’t all use the title, ‘prophet,’ but they’re always around, and they do prompt defections.

V.12, “*Because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold.*” The wickedness all around us—in entertainment, in business, in education, in religion—chills our love for Christ. Haven’t you sensed that yourself? We’re not threatened by persecution nearly so much as the pervasive, chilling godlessness all around us.

- C. But these are birth pains. In spite of all this pain, the kingdom of God is being born. Through suffering, many Christians will grow stronger. *Illus.:* This week I listened to a sermon by **Pastor Andrew Brunson**, given a week ago at Wheaton College chapel. He was the missionary arrested in Turkey, falsely charged with spying, and held for 2 years. He is a TEDS grad. He said that after a few days, “*I completely lost the sense of God’s presence. God was silent. And he remained silent for two years.*” When he was finally brought to trial, things were even worse. He said, “*There are some who go into the valley of testing and some do not make it out.... I was broken. I lay there alone in my solitary cell, I had great fear, terrible grief, and I was weeping. And the thought kept going through my mind, ‘Where are you God? Why are you so far away?’ And I opened my mouth as I wept aloud, and I was surprised at what I heard coming out of my mouth. I heard, ‘I love you Jesus. I love you Jesus. I love you Jesus.’ I thought here is my victory. Even if you’re silent, I love you. Even if you let my enemy harm me, I love you.*” Jesus said, “but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

Not only that, but look at **v.14**: “*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*” That’s why Christians risk their lives in Turkey and hundreds of other difficult places. God isn’t stalling the end of the world till things get too bad to endure. He’s waiting for this—the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

Despite all the persecution, despite the defections from Christ from within the church, despite the deceptions of false prophets, the gospel of the kingdom is being birthed.

Does that sound like the kingdom will be left with a paltry few exceptionally brave believers? John actually saw them all in his vision. In Rev. 7 he wrote, *“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”* One of the heavenly elders asked John, *“These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”* Then he answered his own question: *“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation...”* (He doesn’t mean what we think of as *The Tribulation* at the end, but of this long era of which we’re a part.) *“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”* That’s what we’re waiting for.

What Jesus talks about next is actually the answer the disciples’ first question, not the second. When Jesus said that the temple would be demolished, one stone from another, they had asked, **“When will this happen?”** assuming that all these things would happen at the end of the world. But now Jesus paints a picture for them of what we now know to be the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. After a four-year siege the city fell. The Romans butchered the Jews, especially when they tried to guard the altar in the temple. The ancient Jewish historian **Josephus** wrote, *“The heap of corpses mounted higher and higher about the altar; a stream of blood flowed down the Temple’s steps, and the bodies of those slain at the top slipped to the bottom. ... While the Temple was ablaze, the attackers plundered it, and countless people who were caught by them were slaughtered. There was no pity for age and no regard was accorded rank; children and old men, laymen and priests, alike were butchered; every class was pursued and crushed in the grip of war, whether they cried out for mercy or offered resistance.”*

Vv.15-21... Jesus here gave a forewarning to the Christians, which we know from history many of them heeded his warning and fled Jerusalem when they still could. So these verses describe the **beginning** of the age of tribulation which Jesus described in vv.4-14, and age which we are in to this day. Now he switches back again to the broader stage, continuing the thought of v.14. **Vv.22-28...**

II. GOD WILL NOT LET TRIBULATION, NO MATTER HOW BAD, ANNIHILATE HIS ELECT PEOPLE (24:22-28)

- A. The trajectory of persecution and wickedness in the world would annihilate believers if God weren't preserving us. **But again, the real danger is not annihilation but deception.** If we hear that the Messiah has been seen, or hear that there is some powerful figure working "*signs and wonders*" as proof of his deity, don't believe it. They are so deceptive that even God's own people—the elect—would be deceived if God didn't protect them.
- B. Christ's return will be like a lightning bolt that no one can miss. You won't have to go looking for him!
- C. **V.28**, "*Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.*" People looking for a messiah other than Jesus are like vultures circling a rotting carcass. As *The Message* puts it, "*You can be sure that it's not the living Son of Man pulling in those crowds.*" So pay no attention to them!

The disciples' second question was, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Because we sure wouldn't want to miss it! What will be our heads-up? Jesus has said that *what it **won't** be is distress and tribulation.* Those things will be true during the whole age. But these days of tribulation will not last forever and when they end, you won't miss it. **Vv.29-31...**

III. NO ONE WILL MISS THE SIGN OF JESUS' COMING OR THE END OF THE AGE (24:29-35)

- A. The first sign is that it will seem like the skies are coming apart at the seams! (v.29). Do you remember how in **Gen 1** God created the sun and moon, along with stars, “*to govern the day and the night.*” That government ends here, with the prospect of a new kind of heavenly light to come.

In Luke’s record of this same speech, Jesus said, “*There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*” Lk 21:25-26

Listen to what the angel showed John in **Rev. 6:12-17**:

“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?””

- B. Then, against the backdrop of these tormented heavens, another sign appears in vv.30-31: “*Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man*

coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.” Dan. 7 used the same language to describe the Son of Man’s appearance before the Ancient of Days but what was the glory of heaven is the doom of earth. There is no more time. Like the old song says, “Oh sinnerman, where you gonna run to all on that day?”

- C. But what is dreadful to some is glorious to us: *“And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”* Such a trumpet call that can be heard everywhere, echoing through all creation, rousing the bodies of the dead in Christ, and summoning all God’s people—his elect—from the four corners of the world, all to meet the Lord in the air!
- D. With all this at stake, Jesus continues, *“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all **these** things, you know that it is near, right at the door.”* So know the signs here and elsewhere in Scripture that signal the season of Christ’s return. In Luke, Jesus followed these words with one more statement: *“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*
- E. **Vv.34-35:** *“Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* Jesus meant that the generation of the disciples listening to him that day would see the beginning of this great distress—which they did less than 40 years later when Jerusalem fell. And in the future, even when the heavens come apart at the seams, these words of Jesus will remain intact for ever. This *will* happen just as he said.

We fidget a little. We want to say something but we're not sure if we should. Finally, it comes out, "Yes, Lord, but when?" **V.36**, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" No secret has ever been so closely guarded as when Christ will return and this age will end.

IV. NO ONE KNOWS WHEN SO BE READY! (24:36-51)

- A. There is a direct parallel in the Old Testament—the days of Noah. Vv.37-41... In Noah's day no one suspected a thing; no one gave any thought to God's warnings of utter destruction. Noah's gigantic ark was nothing but a laughingstock. We're also told in **2 Pet 2:5** that Noah was "*a preacher of righteousness.*" But his preaching did no good either. Life went on as always to the moment when God himself closed the door of the ark and "*the floods came and took them all away.*" Two men, two women, working side by side—an ordinary work day—when suddenly one is crying out in terror at the rending of the skies and the other is lifted heavenward to meet the Lord in the air!
- B. Next, Jesus gives us another image to ponder. **Vv.42-44**, "*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.*" In this picture Jesus is pictured as the thief breaking into an owner's house. What's that about? The homeowner is Satan, whom Jesus called "*the prince of this world.*" Jesus will pull off a raid to rescue us from this world and Satan will be caught sleeping. He will have no

idea what's about to happen. That's one reason for God's secrecy. **But as his hostages, we must be ready and waiting.** Jesus says, ***"Keep watch!"*** He means, be on your toes spiritually. Don't get wrapped up in worldly business. Don't be distracted. There's an old spiritual that says,

Keep your lamps trimmed and burnin'

The time is drawin' nigh.

- C. Now the picture changes again, to God's own household here in this world. **Vv.45-51...** Here is what it means to be ready: to be ready is to be doing the service God has assigned to us, day in and day out, without slacking off. To be *unready* is to be such a hypocrite that one misuses the people of God and fellowships with those who would be intoxicated with today.

Conclusion

Disciples ask, *"What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"* But that's not the most important question. **The most important question is, are you ready and waiting? To be ready means to faithfully serve Jesus, to watch for the signs, and to be prepared to leave this world without a moment's notice.**