

“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”

Matthew 24:1-31

Introduction

Eschatology: I’d venture to say when you think about terms like the “second coming” or the “end times” your brain (if you grew up in church) goes to books like “Revelation” or (if you’re a little more savvy) to Thessalonians (1&2).

- But here, right before Jesus’ crucifixion is his most extensive prophecy about the “future.” It largely takes place adjacent to Jerusalem on the “Mount of Olives” (so-named because it was once covered by Olive groves). I like to think of it as the first “Olive Garden.”
- Everyone has lots of messianic expectation and it has to do not only with what is going to happen “now” but what is going to happen “later” (notice the repeated discussion of the “end” and the “end of the age”).

Dangers of Prophecy: We should care about prophecy, but care about it in the right way. We have a God who not only knows but holds the future in his hands. So when he tells us what to look for, that is good and important.

- I love a good time travel movie (e.g., *Back to the Future*, *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, *Terminator 2*, *Groundhog Day*, etc.). Most seem to put in place going *back* in time (you have some knowledge of the future that you can use in the past).
- What do we hope to do with that knowledge? If we’re honest (or maybe this is just me), we think of which sporting event to bet on, or which stock to buy, or which lottery numbers to play. The goal is to use that information to enrich myself and make *my* life better. But is that the point of God’s prophecy? No! Prophecy is not for our secret knowledge but to warn and encourage us as we wait for God to accomplish his plan.

Some people get so obsessed with prophecy that they miss the God of the prophecy.

Purpose of Prophecy: Knowing what to look for, knowing the direction of history, is not just so we can avoid discomfort but so we can trust and obey Jesus. The reason Jesus is telling us what is going to happen is so we’ll recognize God’s sovereign hand at work, trust his perfect plan, and persevere until the end.

1. Signs of the Times (vv. 1-8)

¹ 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 end 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.

A New Temple: All that has recently taken place (teaching, flipping tables, miracles, indictment of the Pharisees, etc.) has taken place at the temple (the center point of Israelite religion). Part of the Western Wall finished around this time under the direction of Herod the Great (ca. 19 BCE) was made of enormous limestone blocks mostly weighing from 2 to 8 tons (but one stone is 44 ft long and 11 feet high weighing 300 tons! (cf. [Naval Academy stones floated down street](#))).

- We immediately find some of the trouble in interpreting this passage. The temple will be destroyed (Romans 70 AD). But, even in their destruction, some of the stones are left behind (contra v. 2). It's about the temple (but it's not about the temple?!).
- So, there is a **physical** truth about the destruction of the temple, but there is also a **spiritual** truth we can't miss.
 - "So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (Jn 2:18-22). *The more I think about this passage, the more the role of the temple sits at the center. What is the temple? What does the temple signify? What does the temple point to?
- The *physical* temple is a temporary location for the worship of God and a picture of his presence among his people. This is kinda the point of John's obsession with the tabernacle and the temple. The promise to David of a temple is fulfilled fully and truly and finally in Jesus. "The true temple is not in the stones and beauty of Jerusalem's worship center but in the resurrected body of Jesus" (Sproul).
- The Pharisees, crowds, and (at least here) the disciples get themselves in trouble when they miss Jesus as the center of this provision.
 - They are holding on to Mosaic Israel when the point of the people of God and the city of God was to expand his rule and reign to **all** of creation. God is no longer confined to the temple or Jerusalem. The old order is ending and the new is coming. He is King of all people and all creation. *This is why we have to be careful with conflating the modern nation-state of Israel with the Biblical people of God and especially with his plan and purposes in the future.* The point of Revelation and other prophecies about God are not that he will come and reign in a tiny sliver of the Middle East but over all creation, his city will extend far beyond its previous geography, and his people will not be from one ethnic group but will be all those who place their faith in him.

Messianic Uncertainty: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" The disciples are trying to understand the "latter days," the

“end of the age.” They want to know the what and the when about Jesus, the Messiah, and what that means for his rule as King.

- You can imagine, Jesus entered the city in ch. 21 to a royal welcome (i.e., “Son of David”), a messianic greeting (i.e., “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”). He cleanses the temple of its defilement by money changers and tells the religious leaders that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from” them. The disciples must be thinking that he’s ready to establish his messianic kingdom. Was he ready to raise an army and destroy the Romans? What would his inauguration as king look like? Would there be a war? What would happen to Jerusalem and the temple?

Jesus answers their questions so they can understand what it looks like for his kingdom to truly come.

- (1) **He is coming back.** Παρουσία (gr.; lat. advent). Second coming (“advent”).
- (2) **Things will get worse.** There are things that will happen, wars and rumors of wars... nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places... For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.

Devolution: ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. All these things are “birth pains.” The new creation that God has promised is coming, but it’s on the other side of the pain of childbirth: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Rom 8:22). So, it’s not so much “bad to worse” as “through the bad to get to the good.”

- The illustration of childbirth is helpful. The contractions grow in intensity and frequency but there are moments of calm between them.
- But we know things are getting worse (e.g., technology has been able to mask it, but we are not getting “better”). Wars haven’t ceased. Poverty hasn’t gone away. Racism isn’t abolished. Sickness hasn’t been cured (e.g., “novel” Coronavirus).

Comfort: This knowledge is meant to comfort. It’s supposed to happen (God is in control). The end result is worth it (new creation). Because of this, we can endure the trouble without anxiety. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. Do the problems of the world give you anxiety or do they strengthen your desire for Jesus to return? Every suffering we endure is an opportunity to be conformed to the image of Christ and long for his return.

Would We Even Know?: This is not so much about giving you specifics about the end times (and definitely not meant to predict a day or hour) but is intended to strengthen our desire to see Jesus.

- Pastor James and I were discussing this idea. The disciples walked and talked with Jesus and missed so much of his plan (e.g., crucifixion). The religious leaders studied and memorized the Scripture and missed the Messiah when he was standing right in front of them. Why do we think we would do better?
- I think these prophecies are not meant to give us specific events to pinpoint but more to give us a disposition of trust and submission to see what God is doing in the moment.

2. A Call to Persevere (vv. 9-14)

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.

Tribulation: You could plop this section into the book of Revelation and it would fit perfectly. It talks about tribulation (Rev 1:9, 2:9-10; 2:22; 7:14). And that tribulation is not just general suffering but, for believers, suffering for Jesus’ sake. The love of many will grow cold, like the church in Revelation is warned not to abandon the love [they] had at first (Rev 2:4).

- Btw, we should expect persecution. “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). Why do we expect following Jesus to be easy? Maybe our expectations are making it harder on us (especially when Jesus promised tribulation)!
- This period of the last days will be characterized by “**lawlessness**.” This prophecy, along with most of this chapter is directly related to prophecies in the book of Daniel, where the prophet tells us that the latter days will be characterized by rebellion against God, denying the true God, and living in unrighteousness. This is evident in the rest of the NT when you read books like 1 John, 2 Thessalonians, and (of course) Revelation.

Promise Motivates Perseverance: The promise of Jesus’ return is to motivate us to persevere through suffering, not get distracted by false saviors, and continue to do what we are on the earth to do: “proclaim the gospel of the kingdom throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations.”

- The goal of end times prophecy (whether in Thessalonians, Revelation, or the Gospels) is not to make us anxious or fixated on when things will happen, or apathetic (not to care because it’s all gonna end) but to persevere and proclaim.
- Is your life characterized by perseverance in suffering and proclamation of the gospel? Or is it characterized by apathy and inaction?

3. A Powerful Warning (vv. 15-28)

¹⁵ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut

short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Hard Passage: "If a group of Christians sat down to list perplexing passages, it wouldn't take long for someone to mention Matthew 24:15-16" (Dan Doriani). Many see this passage referring to specific events that happen in the near future (e.g., the destruction of the temple in AD 70) and many see it referring to events much further in the future (that haven't happened yet).

- It mentions seemingly local events (e.g., Judea) and prophecies about the temple (e.g., abomination of desolation, etc.).
- But it also seems to point to the far future (e.g., great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be).
- One picture of this tribulation coming is the "abomination of desolation", a defiling abomination promised from the OT. The Jews were on the lookout for such defilement (e.g., pagan sacrifices under Antiochus Epiphanes 168 BC; Maccabean Revolt). Was it the Romans in 70 AD? All of these *were* defiling but nothing seems more defiling to me than the very chief priest of Israel (Caipaphas) executing the Son of God.

Point: The point seems to be, those who's eyes are opened by God will know the second coming when it happens. They'll know it when they see it (hence, let the reader understand). ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

- At this point, the disciples must have thought that the destruction in Jerusalem and Judea was the "sign" of the end they were looking for. But they were mistaken, and Jesus pointed out their error. Jesus said, "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it" (24:23). Basically, the "sign" of Jesus' coming, as he gave it, was his coming! This "sign" will have no predictive value because it comes too late. There is no advance sign of Jesus' coming for us to be able to predict. He comes when he comes, and the believers who are alive will know it when it happens.
- For those who've experienced the real Christ, they won't fall for the fake ones. You've seen the real thing, don't fall for the fake thing. This is true in our daily worship and our end-times expectations.
 - Be wary of people (especially faith leaders) who use crises and fear to manipulate people into following them.
- False Messiahs (Quarles):
 - If someone has to tell you about it, Christ has not returned.
 - If someone attempts to use miracles to convince you, Christ has not returned.
 - If his location is distant or secret, Christ has not returned.
 - If his glory is not displayed for all the world to see, Christ has not returned.

4. A Well-Placed Hope (vv. 29-31)

²⁹ “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.

³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ 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.

Last Days: Lots of people convincingly argue that the “latter days” are inaugurated with the death and resurrection of Jesus. His reign as king is “vindicated” at his death and *especially* resurrection.

- Some want to argue (with merit) that the prophecy of “when these things will be” is not at “the end of space-time” but at the destruction of the temple in AD 70.
- While some of these promises may or may not refer to the temple’s destruction in 70 AD too many of them (along with the rest of the NT) clearly point to something different, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - The Pharisees and others saw the KoG as centering around the Torah, Temple, Sabbath, and other Laws of Moses. But Jesus and the NT repeatedly explain that the coming Kingdom centers on him (life, death, and resurrection). He is the true Wisdom and Word of God. He is the true Sabbath and the true temple that will be raised in three days.
 - And nothing defiles the temple more than Caiaphas’ wicked judgment on the messiah. The chief priest himself is opposing the Lord and his anointed in the last days.
 - The temple is truly destroyed not with its physical demolition by the Romans in 70AD but by the death of Jesus when we see the curtain to the Holy of Holies torn in two.
- So the “last days” are not just some event in the near future (e.g., 70 AD) or some event on the distant horizon, but the entire period of time between Jesus’ first coming in a manger and his second coming in the clouds.
 - Jesus’ death and resurrection ushered in the last days. If someone asks me if we’re living in the last days, I say “Yes, and we have been for 2,000 years.”

So What?

- (1) **Christ is coming back, so be ready.** You should live a life that longs for his return. You should live a life that is ready for his return. You must not be apathetic or anxious but busy proclaiming the gospel.
- (2) **Don’t be distracted by false saviors.** This requires real self-assessment. “It is natural to see other people’s sins, it is grace to see my own” (Kell). In what ways are you following the ways and systems of this world rather than persevering in the way of Christ? We are always susceptible to the deceptive influences of the world. “Let no one deceive you.” Break your relationship with God. Minimize the danger of Satan and the

world. Evil will be made to seem good. “Abide in my word and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

- (3) **Don't be discouraged by tribulation.** Press on in the power of Christ. We live in between the first and second coming of Christ. He is already king but we are waiting for his return (e.g., Robin Hood vs. Sheriff of Nottingham; King Richard). He's going to judge it all, so do the right thing now. The time before his second coming will be characterized by persecution, but every tribulation is an opportunity to trust (“He's got the whole world, in his hands”). A life of true faith is characterized by faith and perseverance. If Jesus experienced the great tribulation of crucifixion, then we can expect to follow in his footsteps (Rev 14:4).

We are called to “look forward to the Lord's return” and, in the meantime, “live responsibly, faithfully, compassionately, and courageously while the Master is away” (Carson).