

Text: Matthew 24-25

Title: The Coming of the Son of Man

Truth: When and What Sign? No one knows, but there are indicators.

Date/Location: Sundays July 26 and August 2, 2020 at FBC

Introduction: Contemporary Setting

The Lord has spent over three years ministering publicly through the nation of Israel. He has preached everywhere and worked miraculous signs such as healing, raising the dead, and casting out demons. He has extended an offer of the kingdom of God to the nation, but he has been largely rejected by the leaders and populace. Some are still following him, but even these ones do not yet fully understand the divine plan for redemption and a delay in the appearance of the kingdom.

Our Lord has just come into Jerusalem with great fanfare and ejected from the temple those who were making God's house into a den of thieves. He told parables that confronted the evil of the Pharisees and chief priests and pronounced grievous woes upon these hypocritical religious leaders. Some of his disciples expected that the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Although Jesus had tamped down this expectation in Luke 19:11-27 immediately before the triumphal entry into the city, this was not well understood, certainly not by the most zealous among them.

So the disciples asked the Lord about His "coming." The opening verses of chapter 24 record their question. They did not conceive of His "coming" in the same way we do, as a "second" coming after a long delay. Many perceived it as his imminent appearance to establish His kingdom. If they had paid close attention to the parable in Luke 19 would they have understood that the nobleman was leaving for a *far* country, to return at some later time after receiving for Himself the right to rule the kingdom.

The disciples had a similar question just a few days later (recorded in Acts 1:6). Evidently the matter of the kingdom of God heavily occupied their minds. They wondered what it would look like in the upcoming days when the Lord takes over the city and nation and

defeats the Romans. It is unclear if they considered much about what the Lord would do with respect to redemption from sin.

We Must be More Clear Now than the Disciples Were Then

- A. The disciples did not have the benefit of hindsight, like we do. Nor did they have the benefit of a completed New Testament revelation that laid out exactly what happened in the Lord's first coming, and the blessed hope of the second coming.

We must remember that the Lord before His crucifixion had not revealed any details about the church. That would come gradually in Acts 1, 2, 10-11, 15 and throughout the early ministry of the apostle Paul. The great distance between the first and second comings was not understood by the disciples as a possibility. Not as much detail was at that time available about the rapture and the judgments and how the kingdom fit with the Tribulation and so forth. The book of Revelation was not yet written, with its clear foretelling of Tribulation events and the kingdom.

We can be sympathetic to them in their situation and highly charged situation. Collectively, we would have been no different. Remember, these men had been "with Jesus" (Acts 4:13) for several years and received all His perfect instruction. They were no "spiritual dummies." Still, they did not have all that is available to us.

We can understand those things more clearly. This opportunity brings with it corresponding greater responsibility.

- B. The general outline of future events is listed in the document "A Brief Outline of Future Events" which is available on our church website. We can use that summary of divine revelation to fit what the Lord is saying into its proper context. This will allow us to understand better what we read in Matthew 24 and 25.
- C. We also do the best we can to approach the text on its own terms—so it can make its own contribution to our understanding. But we do not need to do so from as foggy of a mental position as the disciples. We have all the other revelation of Scripture to contribute to our understanding surrounding these matters. At the same time, I do not believe it is the job of the preacher to fit every

eschatological detail together in every sermon. The sermon of our Lord has great power even if we do not resolve all the interpretive tensions.

I. The Temple to be Destroyed, 24:1-2

- A. The disciples were impressed with the massive buildings. Their height and size and the mass of boulders that were used to build them flabbergasted these men. Archaeologists who have discovered a quarry that likely supplied Herod's construction say that some single stones were up to 24 feet long (8 meters). They were dragged to the building site by oxen.
- B. But Jesus shocked them by saying that all the stones would be thrown down and the structure destroyed. This was as unimaginable as a prediction years in advance that the twin towers in New York would collapse in the space of a couple of hours on a fall day in September 2001.
- C. What temple was Jesus speaking about? Obviously, His words were fulfilled in 70 AD when Titus and his legion destroyed the city. Will they be fulfilled a second time? The Bible discloses that the temple will be rebuilt and operational during the early years of the Tribulation (2 Thess. 2:4). That temple will be desecrated by the Antichrist and probably be destroyed in the end time (Rev. 11:1-3). It will be replaced by a temple in our Lord's millennial kingdom. This millennial temple is described with detail in Ezekiel 40–48.
- D. What I believe is important to note is this: The remainder of the chapter does not focus on the temple destruction. The Lord uses the opportunity to point the disciples to more important truth, which is focused on the second coming of Jesus Christ. I believe He mentions that to attract their attention so that He can warn them to take a stance of readiness in light of what is coming. He looks beyond the "highlight" of the destruction in 70AD to a point farther in the future when many important events will unfold. Jesus' sermon looks beyond 70 AD to a time yet future that is associated with HIS second coming—not the coming of the Roman army of Titus.

II. The Disciples Questions: When and What Sign? 24:3

- A. They ask two private questions. The sermon is a private talk from the Lord which Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recorded later for the public.
- B. The two questions are plainly spoken:
 - 1. When will these things happen?
 - 2. What will be the sign of Your coming and the end of the age?
- C. I believe that the contents of the chapter bear out this fact: Jesus answered their questions. He did not answer them in a rigidly outlined format, but there is some discernible structure which is followed in the major headings below. He answers the “signs” question with increasing specificity throughout 24:4-31, and then the “when” question at 24:32 and following.
- D. Today, most everyone would like to know the future. There is a certain segment of the population which is infatuated with signs and omens and prophecies—some from a Christian perspective, and some from a pagan perspective. I’m sure we would admit to wanting to know something of the future. It is a mercy we do not.

III. Almost Signs, 24:4-8

- A. I call these the “almost signs” because the Lord said “the end is not yet” (6) and “these are the beginning of sorrows” (8). They wanted to know when the end would be, and Jesus says, with these signs, “not yet.”
- B. The beginning of sorrows refers to the early and less severe pains of childbirth. They may extend over a period of time but they are before the real labor comes. They become more intense as birth nears. The “beginning of sorrows” portend the end result of birth, but are not the birth yet. So these pains Jesus speaks of are associated with the end, but are not quite at the very end.
- C. What are the signs? The Lord lists several of them:
 - 1. Deception by false christs.
 - 2. Wars and rumors of wars. Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom.
 - 3. Famines, pestilences, earthquakes.

Some interpreters correlate these events to the very early days of the Tribulation. That is fine. I believe they can be interpreted more broadly to include the present era leading up to the rapture and the Tribulation. This kind of events will characterize the time leading up to the coming of Christ. But all the indicators will be growing throughout the present age leading up to the very end.

- E. Response: do not be troubled, know that these things have to happen, but the end is not quite yet. These things are the beginning of sorrows. In other words, do not get worked up about this stuff. Settle down! It is *normal*. It is the old normal and the new normal. It is the way things are in a sinful world. We should not be surprised by expressions of human depravity today that look much like the increasingly bad expressions of depravity near the end. The Christian has a unique power (from God) to live at peace in a world full of such trouble and fear.

IV. Increasing Signs Close to the Coming, 24:9-26

- A. Heavy persecution and more false prophets, 24:9-12. As the world enters into the Tribulation itself, the 7 years after the rapture, there will break out a terrible persecution against Christ-followers. All the nations will hate Christ's people. Family members will betray one another to death. Hate will rise to pandemic proportions. Notice again there will be false prophets (teachers) who will bring deception about all kinds of matters. They will teach that wrong is right and right is wrong. The groundwork is all laid already for this in the early birth pains, but it will become far more pronounced. Lawlessness will abound. Love will grow cold. None of this sounds far-fetched, does it?
- B. Those who hold out until the end will be saved, 24:13. The "enduring to the end" in 24:13 is often mis-used to refer to perseverance of the saints in general. Rather, it refers to a specific situation—enduring to the end of the Tribulation. About that, I used to simply hold that those who "physically survived" until the end were saved, i.e. physically saved at the end by the Lord's deliverance. But some believers *and* unbelievers will be physically delivered through the Tribulation, so this is somewhat dissatisfying. It is better understood to do with the context of the Tribulation. Those

who live in it and survive with their faith intact and their love not cold, these will be rescued physically and will enter into kingdom blessing (25:34). There are others who will survive to the end of the Tribulation but will be cast out as goats in the judgment (25:41-46).

- C. Universal preaching of the Gospel right before the end, 24:14. This also has been mis-appropriated into the present age in a way that denies the imminency of the rapture. In fact, the gospel does *not* need to be preached to all nations before Christ raptures the church, because after the rapture, it *will* be preached to the entire world just up to the end of the age.
1. What gospel? Jesus answers, “this gospel of the kingdom.” Not just the death-burial-resurrection of Christ for sin, our need, and our repentant-faith response. Remember, Jesus had not yet died when he spoke these words! He refers to the good news that God is going to establish a kingdom with Jesus as King, on this earth, over Jerusalem and the entire globe. See the messages I gave on December 8, 15, and 29 of 2019 for more details. Personal salvation “fits into” the kingdom this way: you need to be born again or you will not enter and enjoy the kingdom of Christ.
 2. Who will do the kingdom-gospel preaching? Three distinct entities: (a) The 144,000 of Revelation 7:3-4 will be Jewish missionaries who will minister the gospel across the world. It seems that those described in 7:9-10 are saved as a result of their ministry. (b) The two witnesses of Revelation 11:3-12 will—besides their fire-breathing judgment—undoubtedly have a part in proclaiming the truth of the coming King. (c) There is also an angelic messenger from God, described as flying over the earth commanding people to fear God and glorify Him. He presents the eternal gospel (Revelation 14:6-7).
- D. The Abomination of Desolation, 24:15-20. The event is described in verse 15. It refers to the desecration of the temple by the Antichrist. It was foretold in Daniel 9:27 and foreshadowed in the devilish rule of Antiochus Epiphanies in the inter-testamental period of Jewish history. In this event, the Antichrist will claim to be God as

he takes a seat in the temple (2 Thess. 2:4). The reader is referred to Daniel. Jesus indicates thus that Daniel's prophecy is for a far future time, a time associated with Jesus' second coming—again, not associated with the coming of the Romans.

When the abomination occurs, the Lord tells those in Judea to flee the area, 24:16-20, because very bad things are coming.

- E. Great Tribulation, 24:21-22. Why flee? Because that will be the beginning of the "Great Tribulation." It will be about the middle of the seven year period described by Daniel. It will be truly unprecedented in its devastation and cruelty. Apart from a divine intervention, no one would survive this eschatological second holocaust. It is called the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7). It is the time of distress (Dan. 12:1). It is the opening portion of the Day of the Lord (Zeph. 1:14).
- F. More deception by false christs, prophets, and signs, 24:23-26. The heavy distress will bring out false theories of Christ's return and the end of the age. But Jesus says not to be deceived. Deception is a key mark of the Tribulation (2 Thess. 2:9-12). The powers that be are in full practice mode even today in 2020. Although we need not worry about living through the Tribulation, it is critical for us to practice NOT being deceived. Look beyond the prima-facie statements to the real explanation. Figure out the underlying spiritual reasons for the news. Do not just follow the money. Follow the depravity.

V. THE Sign, 24:27-31

- A. It will be obvious, like lightning and carrion birds, 24:27-28. The disciples want to know the sign of Jesus coming to reign. He tells them that it will be like a bolt of lightning is visible from all over, or like the location of a dead animal is indicated by the vultures circling overhead. There will not be a need for announcements of the sort in verses 23 and 26.
- B. Disturbance of the heavenly bodies, 24:29. As the coming of Christ happens, just before it occurs there will be a darkening of the sun and moon, and stars will begin to disappear. Somehow the heavens will be disturbed. This sounds like Joel 2:30-31 and Revelation

8:12—because it is. It will be a very strange day according to Zech. 14:6-7. Then at that time they will see...

- C. The sign is the Son of Man coming in the clouds, 24:30a. Jesus will return as he left (Acts 1:11). This language connects Christ to Daniel 7:13, which will happen as Matthew 26:64 also says. Back to the heavenly bodies, it may be that their disturbance is slightly ahead of, or in the “wake” of, the Lord’s path from the third heaven through the starry heavens, to the sky and then the earth.
- D. The people of the earth will mourn, 24:30b. Things are *really* outside of their control at this point. They will recognize that they are now going to be held to account for their wicked actions because they actually see Jesus (Zechariah 12:10-12). There seems to be around this time a massive conversion of Jews to the Messiah. This will affect the numbers of the “all Israel will be saved” situation (Rom. 11:25-27) that will be the final result of Christ’s coming and judgment of the Jews in the wilderness of the peoples (Ezekiel 20:34-38).
- E. The angels are sent to gather the elect in the earth, 24:31. They will sort out who belongs to God and who does not. This is a step to prepare for the judgment of 25:31. This describes the events spoken of in parable form in Matthew 13:37-43 and 49-50.

VI. Jesus Answers the “When” Question, 24:32-24:36

Now, the moment the disciples were waiting for...Jesus is going to tell them “when” this all will happen.

- A. Parable of fig tree: the “when” will be evident, 24:32-35. This is like the lightning and carrion bird illustrations. Jesus explains that just like a fig tree shows signs of summer, so also these signs show that the end of the age is at the door.
 - 1. The fig tree was common in Israel and made a good illustration.
 - 2. In the same way you know summer is coming by the condition of the trees, you know that when the abomination occurs, and the heavenly bodies are disturbed, that is it. The end has come. Christ is about to break in.

- B. Fact: no one knows the day or hour, 24:36. And that is true for everyone up to our present day. Just like we do not know the day or hour of the first phase of the Lord's coming (called the rapture), so the Jews and Gentiles alive during the Tribulation will not know the day or hour. But as that event draws near, it will become possible to know the general season of the Lord's return and the end of the age. That will happen for those who see the above signs unfold. In other words, they will have even more information than we do and will be able to understand the coming of Christ in a new way. They still will not know the precise day or hour, but the general timeframe will be known to them.
- C. "This generation" refers to the generation alive that sees the increasingly close signs and then "THE" sign (previous two sections). It is not the generation of disciples alive when Jesus spoke; nor is it the nation of Israel generally. It is those who see the signs. No more complicated than that. So, if we are raptured today, the generation presently alive today will see the Tribulation and they can be assured that they will see the second coming of Christ. But when that clock starts ticking we do not know.
- D. Eventually, heaven and earth will be replaced (Revelation 20:11, 21:1). But the word of Christ will stand fast through all of it. Not one little part of it will fail to be fulfilled.

VII. Therefore, Be Ready, 24:37-25:30

Consequently, you must be ready. "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness? (2 Peter 3:11). This is *the* lesson from this section of Scripture. God does not desire us to become all weird about signs in the 24-hour news cycle, or to focus all our attention on the minute details of end-times prophecy. The point of all this is to say that you and I must be ready for the return of Christ. We do not know when the church will be raptured, and likewise even those alive in that last generation will not know the day and hour when Jesus will descend from Heaven. This lengthy section explains the need for readiness and how to be ready. Following is a sketch of the passage without tons of detail so that we do not miss the big picture.

- A. Illustration of the days of Noah, 24:37-39. During the time of Noah, the people ignored Noah's preaching (2 Peter 2:5). They carried on with their eating and partying. Young people were married, and their parents concerned themselves about giving them in marriage. They lived life without a care about God or righteousness. Consequently, they were ignorant of what was coming. The flood came and "took them all away." The "taking" was to judgment, not to heaven.
- B. Sudden devastating judgment demands readiness, 24:40-44. Just like in the days of Noah, when Jesus returns there will be people working side-by-side where one is taken in judgment and the other is left to enjoy the blessing of the kingdom. Do not let the cares of this life crowd out God (Matt 13:22)!
- C. Illustration of faithful and evil servants which teaches us to be ready, 24:45-51. This and the following verses up to 30 show us not only the need to be ready, but *how* to be ready. We remain ready by serving the master as we are directed during His entire absence. We do so because when he comes, we want to be found doing that which pleases Him. But when you get distracted by pleasing yourself, you will forget the master is coming and will show yourself unfaithful and worthy of judgment.
- D. Parable of virgins teaches us to be prepared for delay and yet be ready at any moment, 25:1-13. We maintain readiness **by being prepared** for a potentially long delay. We do not sell our goods and wait on a high hill with eyes to heaven waiting for the Lord to come. No! We work and plan and serve as if the time remaining is long, because for many prior generations it *has* been a long time.
- E. Parable of the talents teaches us to be ready **by being faithful**, 25:14-30. This is like 24:45-51. The focus is on faithful service and an evaluation at the end. This is true over all the ages, and even also during the Tribulation. Just because there are bad things going on "out there," does not excuse us from faithfulness.

VIII. Judgment of the Gentiles, 25:31-46

- A. We have little space to detail this section of the Lord's message. However, we can say that the nations of those alive at the end of the Tribulation will be divided into two groups: sheep and goats.
- B. The figure of sheep represents those individuals among the Gentiles who will be friendly toward the Jews during the Tribulation. This is a demonstration of their faith and true salvation.
- C. The figure of goats represents those Gentiles who were enemies of the Jews. They thus demonstrate that they did not have the grace of God in their lives, and they will be judged because they do not believe in Christ.
- D. Corrections: There are a couple of very common misunderstandings about this section of Scripture.
 - 1. This section does *not* speak of a general judgment of all of humanity of all time. Only those alive at the second coming of Christ are subjects of this judgment—*not* those who have died before. It is not the “end of time” judgment because the kingdom comes after this point, so there is more time to pass before “the end of the world.” The Jews are *not* the subjects of this judgment. Matthew 25:31 tells us that it is a judgment of “the nations” which refers to the “goyim” in Old Testament language, the non-Jewish nations. It contrasts them with “the least of these My brothers” which naturally to refer to Jesus' Jewish brethren. Should you object that the Jews must be judged too, you are correct—you have simply forgotten Ezekiel 20:34-38 that explains what will happen to them. They will be evaluated in a different setting.
 - 2. Another correction: Your salvation is *not* determined by works or properly carrying out social justice or benevolence. Works do demonstrate the reality of salvation. But being friendly to the Jews is not a super-meritorious work that immediately obligates God to ignore your sin. In other words, being a helper on the underground railroad, or an Oskar Schindler, does not merit eternal salvation—even though those people were heroic and

they did very good works. It is only the blood of Christ that saves.

Each era has its issues of faithfulness, those issues which particularly test our faithfulness. In our day, there are such issues: will you continue to gather for worship despite the risk of a virus? Will you open your mouth for Christ when it is politically not expedient to do so? Will you proclaim the need for repentance when sin is called moral and morality is called sin?

Conclusion

We know a lot about the Lord's return and the end of the age. We do not know everything we might like. But we do know enough to be faithful to Christ until He comes. Let us be about that. We are to live for Him, grow in grace and knowledge of Christ, testify for him, make disciples, be baptized and baptize, be faithful in the local church, and wait expectantly for His return.

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