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Matthew 24:1-35

Understanding the Times We Live In and the Time to Come

One of the most difficult and highly debated areas of Christian theology is *eschatology* - and that's a five dollar word that simply means the study of what the Bible says about the *end times* - the end of history, when Christ returns and this world passes away. Now, eschatology can be incredibly difficult to study, and most relevant passages are highly controversial and debated. For this reason, many people shy away from them - from passages like Matthew 24, or 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, or the whole book of Revelation.

But we cannot do that. We *need* to study these truths. They are God's Word - they're good for us, revealed for a reason. Passages about the end times, and what is to come - are given so that we might have a *sobering perspective* on our lives and all of human history. Passages like this remind and teach us that there are *core truths* about the end times that are not debated or hard to understand at all! Jesus is surely coming, bringing both judgment and eternal salvation - these are essential, glorious truths of the gospel we all must believe! But the *details* of Christ's second coming are not as clear in scripture, and there have been many different approaches to reading these passages and putting them all together. So my aim for today's sermon is that we all walk out of here understanding these topics more clearly. But I do also want to say that, if you walk out of here not quite sure if you agree with every detail of what I say about this passage today - *that's ok*. It's a difficult passage. The details of the end times are a complex subject, one that it is *more than ok* for us disagree about.

But the difficulty of the text can never be an excuse for us to ignore it. We must wrestle with difficult texts like this - like our passage today: *Matthew 24:1-35*. It is indeed a difficult, highly debated text. And for that reason, today's sermon will deal heavily with *how to understand* what's going on in it. So let me start by explaining *why understanding this text is so important*. This passage gives us right expectations about this life, warning us against having expectations that are *too high* or *too low*, both of which lead to discouragement. It warns us against having expectations of the Christian life that are *too high* - thinking that it will be free of trial; for here Jesus teaches clearly that all Christians, from the time he left to the time He returns, live in a tumultuous age full of trials, tribulations, and "birth pains." But He also warns

us against expectations that are *too low* - lest we grow discouraged in this life and give up hope as we see the evil and suffering all around us, He reminds us of the certainty of His Second Coming; Jesus exhorts us here to remember the *absolutely guaranteed truth* of His *glorious return!* Jesus is surely coming back, and we must fix our eyes on that glorious truth in order to persevere and endure until then.

That's what this passage shows us; that's why we need to hear it. But as I've said: it's still a difficult passage, requiring us to think it through carefully. So we first need to understand the *context* and *structure* of the passage.

This passage begins, in vv.1-2, with Jesus and his disciples leaving the temple. As they leave, the disciples point out all the large, beautiful buildings of the temple complex, marveling at the impressive architecture. But Jesus responds, saying: "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" (v.2). So, after Jesus went up to sit on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to question him about what he said, saying, "'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" (v.3).

Now, when we hear this verse, we immediately see that they're asking two different questions, don't we? They're asking, first, 1. About the destruction of the temple, which Jesus just predicted; and secondly, 2. About Jesus's "coming" and the end of the age - the end times. Now, we know these are two very different events that do not happen at the same time; after all, the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., and we live 2,000 years later, and Jesus still hasn't returned yet!

But here's a key insight into understanding this passage: when the disciples asked the question, in their mind, *it was only one question*; they assumed that the destruction of the temple, the coming of Christ in His glory, and the end of this age and beginning of His Kingdom, would all happen at the same time. So Jesus is answering both questions here - about the destruction of the temple, and the end of the age, when he comes again. But He does so in a way that corrects their misunderstandings and faulty assumptions: basically, he's telling them that there will be a long *delay*, a long period of waiting, between the temple's destruction and the return of Christ at the end of the age.

And this means that the events of vv. 4-35 deal with both things that have already happened, things that are happening now, and things that have not yet happened. And that is

exactly why this passage can be so difficult, and why there are so many different interpretations of it. Some believe that everything in passage has already happened in the past. Some believe that nothing in it has happened yet, and it will all happen in the future. And many others believe that it is a mix of both; yet even here, there are many different views of how to parse out what exactly has and hasn't happened yet.

So this means that *understanding the structure of this passage* is very important for us. One significant commentator, D.A. Carson, helpfully outlines the passage this way, and I think he's right: vv.4-28 cover a general description of the "birth pains" (v.8) that will characterize this world and human history, from when Jesus left, up until the moment he returns. This is why Jesus says, in v.34, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." Clearly, this is not true about the return of Christ - we are living 2,000 years later and He hasn't come back yet. So that means that "all these things" refers to the "birth pains," described in verses 4-28, that all lead up to and anticipate the second coming of Christ. But in what way did Jesus's own generation, the first generation of the early church, witness "all of these things take place"? Well, again, it clearly doesn't mean that they were all finished. Instead, it means that they all *began* - while Jesus's generation was still alive, Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, and the "birth pains" of this current age began, and will continue, until Christ returns again.¹

So verses 4-28 describe the "birth pains" characteristic of not only Jesus's generation, but ours as well, and every generation until he returns. Except for the fact that Jesus includes one specific example that has already been completed - and that is the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple, in vv.15-23; this is a particularly violent birth pain, which he mentions in detail because the disciples had just specifically asked about it.

Then, Jesus returns to the general "birth pains" of this age of tribulation, in vv.23-28. Then, "immediately" after this age is over, Jesus will return, as He tells us in vv.29-31. And final verses, 32-35, reflect back on the time of the "birth pains," drawing out an application for how we should live.

So that is the structure of this complex passage; now let's march through it a little more slowly.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, vol. 9 (2010), 555-557.

I. Until Christ Returns, We Must All Expect and Endure Trying Times and Tribulation (Matt. 24:1-28)

In verses 4-28, Jesus is describing what the age between his Ascension into heaven and Second Coming are like. Drawing on Old Testament imagery, He describes this time as being filled with “birth pains” (v.8).² So in these verses, Jesus is telling us what to expect in this whole age in between his *first coming* and the *second coming*; he gives us a list of these “birth pains” describing this age. The first one is:

Many false teachers will try to lead us astray (vv.4-5, 23-28)

This is the first “birth pain” mentioned, in verses 4-5. It’s also the *last one* he mentions, as he brings the topic back up in verses 23-28. Clearly, Jesus is emphasizing this particular “birth pain” - the time in between the first and second coming of Christ will be marked by false teachers and prophets - even *false messiahs*. He says, “See that no one leads you astray, for many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Christ” (vv.4-5). Many will come and claim to be Christ, the promised savior. Many false teachers and prophets have come, and will continue to come, leading many astray. Indeed, there have been many who have claimed to be saviors and messiahs, even claiming to be Jesus.

I have a friend who was a long-term missionary in China for many years. Shortly after he moved to a Chinese city and began planting a church, he was visited at home by a woman who claimed to be the female reincarnation of Christ, and had started a cult that tried to convince Christian house churches throughout China to follow her; and such false heresies and false messianic claims are not new - they have been around ever since the first century. We could think of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, who claimed to come in the name of Jesus and have received a prophetic vision - and yet delivered false doctrines that directly contradicted and usurped the Word of God. We should not be surprised when such false messianic figures spring up throughout history, nor should we be led away by their false claims and teachings; Christ has warned us that this will happen, and so it has, all through history, ever since Christ left - and it will continue until He comes again.

² For example, see Isa. 13:8; 26:17; Jer. 4:31; 6:24; Micah 4:9-10. such as Isa. 13:8; 26:17; Jer. 4:31; 6:24; Micah 4:9-10

Therefore, we must be on guard; we have to know the truth, we have to know the Bible; and we have to carefully test the spirits of anyone who claims to be a teacher, or who claims to “come in the name of Christ.” And if anyone claims to be a new prophet, bringing about *new revelation* or *new truth*, claiming that they bring the Word of GOD and have the same authority as the Bible - or even *greater authority!* - then we must not be deceived; we must *immediately* recognize them as false prophets trying to deceive us. If anyone tries to convince us that Christ has already returned, we must not be fooled into following them. Be on guard: there are many false teachers, false prophets, false messiahs, heretical cult leaders and wolves seeking to deceive and lead us astray out there. So we must endure faithfully by *not being deceived*; and that means we must be *firmly grounded in the Word of Truth*. If we know what God’s Word truly says and means, we will not be led astray.

The second “birth pain” we see is that...

The nations will rage (6-7a)

“Wars and rumors of wars” between nations and kingdoms, which rise and fall. - We must not be alarmed by such things. EMpires rise and fall. Rome fell. The Holy Roman Empire spread throughout Europe and eventually fell. The British Empire rose and fell. The Third Reich rose and fell. World War broke out - twice. We must not be alarmed and panic. If war breaks out in the Middle East (as it often does), or countries tragically fall, or our own country enters a war or declines in power - we must not panic and assume the world is ending. False teachers seize on such calamities and tragedies, trying to get us to buy into their false claims out of fear. But we must not be fooled; we know many such things must happen. Jesus tells us, in verse 6, “See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” This is simply part of living in this age until Christ comes - it is one of the “birth pains.”

Next, he tells us...

Creation will groan (7b)

Natural disasters, such as famines and earthquakes (and I’m sure we could add hurricanes and tornadoes and floods and wildfires) will abound in various places, reminders of GOD’s judgment against the sin of this world. As Paul tells us in Rom. 8:19-22, creation itself is stained and broken by sin, crying out and groaning in birth pains, longing for the New Creation. Every

natural disaster is a reminder not to get too comfortable here, because this world is not our home; things are right - the very natural world itself is broken and stained by our sin. Yet it's also a reminder that these are but birth pains leading up to the glorious moment when *all will be made well*: when Jesus comes, He will bring about a *New Creation*, where even the world itself is safe and peaceful! No more tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, drought, famine, or wild animal attacks, or viruses and pandemics! Oh, come Lord Jesus!

There will be persecution (v.9)

He says in verse 9, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nation's for my name's sake." We are to assume and expect persecution on behalf of Christ as we live out the Christian life in this world. Jesus consistently tells us that *suffering and persecution* for believing the gospel is to be *expected* - it's the default, the norm. America and the West has been so blessed to be free of so much religious persecution for so long. But let us not be fooled into getting too comfortable. Christ has not returned yet. Therefore, we must expect persecution to come. Sometimes it comes from friends and family, from those in our community or workplace, or even from the government. Maybe it's being insulted or excluded because of our beliefs and faith. Maybe it will mean fines, imprisonment, or even being denied school or job opportunities because of our convictions and faithfulness to God. Or maybe, like so many Christians around the world and throughout history, it will mean violent persecution - even martyrdom. Persecution has always marked this age and it always will, until Christ comes - because make no mistake: this is an age at war. Christ will prevail, and we will prevail with Him! But only if we endure with Him.

And unfortunately...

Many will fall away from the faith (vv. 10-13)

Jesus prophesies that "many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another." Now, we know that true believers cannot lose their salvation - they persevere to the end; as v.13 says, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." But there will be many who *claim* to be Christians, who *claim to have faith and believe*, but then *fall away* from the faith, showing they were never truly Christians. Some fall away because they follow after false teachers (v.11) Some fall away because they choose "lawlessness," not "love," and want to live a life of sin; they hate God and the church because they love this world and their sin.

But, we do not lose hope! Because...

The gospel will be proclaimed to all nations before Christ returns (v.14)

Despite the tumultuous nations and creation, despite the rampant false teaching, persecution, and apostasy, *the gospel of Christ and the mission of the Church will prevail*. Our mission is to proclaim the gospel and make disciples of all nations - of all people everywhere! When the world seems to go crazy all around us, we can't panic - we don't need to change tactics, give in, or hunker down in fear; our orders stay the same: *preach the gospel and make disciples in all the earth!* And as we do so, we hasten the return of Christ, for "this gospel... will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." So let us not be discouraged; let us preach Christ; let us proclaim the gospel boldly, urgently, and lovingly to anyone and everyone we can, for as long as we can!

So Jesus has described this age as a time of great distress, full of tribulations and "birth pains." Now, he turns to described a particular example of a particular birth pain - the destruction of the temple - because the disciples asked about it - and also because it serves as an example of what this age looks like.

A specific birth pain: the destruction of the temple (vv.15-22)

Verses 15-16 make it clear that the destruction of the temple is in view here: the "holy place" is an obvious reference to the temple, especially after they just left the temple and the disciples asked about it's destruction. But Jesus also refers to it by the phrase "abomination of desolation." He's alluding to Daniel, where the phrase is used three times (9:27; 11:31; 12:11) to refer to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And we know, historically, that the temple was indeed destroyed after Jesus ascended into heaven, in 70 A.D. So, in verses 17-20, Jesus tells His disciples - all in Jerusalem who would believe His word - to *flee Jerusalem* when Rome began to siege the city - which began a couple of years before the city was destroyed. He tells them to flee to the mountains in haste, not even going back for their coat. Why? Because "there will be a great tribulation," unlike any before or after it (v.21). Now, this might seem like extravagant language to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. at first. We are so used to the vast numbers of death - ranking in the millions - that occurred in WWII, by the Nazis and by

Stalin. But as Carson notes, there has never been “so high a percentage of a great city’s population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the fall of Jerusalem.”³ And yet, remarkably, it is historically held that very few Christians were actually killed during the fall of Jerusalem, as brutal as it was! Why? Because they *heeded Christ’s warning* and fled the city for the mountains.

So then, this is a fitting example of the age we live in. We live in tumultuous times. There are many signs of God’s judgment against sin and evil in this world. The world and nations rage against us; false teachers deceive, unbelievers persecute. Professing Christians fall away. And yet, we must not panic or despair. The Lord will preserve us, His people. We must simply trust and follow Him. So let us persevere and not give up; let us continue in faith and obedience, no matter what; let us obey the Lord and proclaim the gospel.

But how can we persevere despite all of these trials and tribulations? We must...

II. We Must Persevere by Always Remembering that Christ Will Surely Return in Glory (Matt. 24:29-35)

Jesus switches to speaking about the future, the end times, in *verse 29*, saying, “*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.” We’ve just run through Jesus’s long depiction of what this long age looks like, ever since He left, and will continue to look like until the day He returns: a tumultuous time full of various trials and tribulations. That’s why he says “after the tribulation of those days” - we’re living in those days of tribulation, the days of the “birth pains” now, ever since Christ left, and until He returns. And *immediately* after this time is over, *the whole world will end!* That’s what he’s describing in this verse, with the moon and sky darkening, the stars falling, heaven shaking.

But this is not bad news: this is *gloriously good news!* Because as soon as this age ends and the world ends, here what will happen, in verses 30-3: “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. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather the elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

³ D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, 563.

In other words, Jesus is saying, “Don’t give up! Don’t lose hope! Don’t be discouraged!” No matter how long Jesus delays and that age goes on; no matter how dark these days of tribulation get. Because *as soon as this time is over, Jesus will “immediately” return in glory and bring peace and salvation, making all things right!* When know how history ends - it is absolutely certain, promised and sealed by God Himself! History will end with *Jesus, “the Son of Man coming on the clouds with glory!”* As we sang early, as “the clouds be rolled back as a scroll, the trumps shall resound, the Lord shall descend, even so, it is well with my soul!” The end of the world, the coming judgment against the sin, evil, and suffering of this world - that should be our certain doom, shouldn’t it? That should fill our hearts with fear! And yet - it will be well with our soul, if we are in Christ by faith! Why? Because *we will not enter in judgment, but eternal salvation!* That is, *if believe in the gospel of Christ.* When He comes, in “power and great glory,” every single “birth pain” and stain of sin, every bit of suffering and evil thing, will be *vanquished and will be no more!* Jesus will gather up all his people - the “elect,” His chosen people, which means Christians, those whom Christ has given new hearts and saved, those who believe in the gospel. All who are in Christ by grace through faith *will be saved!* Whether we die before then, or if He comes tomorrow - when Christ comes, He will come in *power and glory,* and all true believers will be *brought home to live in His glorious Kingdom forever - to eternal salvation with Christ, in the New Heavens and New Earth!*

So then, what do we do the truths of this text, the reality of this age we live in, and the knowledge of the future that we hold in our hands here? How do we apply it? Jesus gives us the application in vv.32-33: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” In other words, he says, look around you: do you see the signs of the “birth pains”? Then know what time it is: we live in the days of tribulation. And yes, it might be a long wait; we must endure as long as Christ tarries. But these “birth pains” are also constant reminds that the moment is coming when labor ends: every birth pain is a reminder that “he is near, at the very gates.” At any moment, Christ could return! For he surely will!

So if you’re feeling discouraged by the “birth pains” of this age of tribulation we live in, don’t be discouraged; take heart, brothers and sisters, and persevere by *remembering that Christ is coming again, and he will come in power and glory to bring us home to His eternal shores!* And we don’t have to worry about whether or not it will happen - it is absolutely certain!

Because it depends on Christ, not us. As verse 35 says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Jesus’s word will be fulfilled; God will keep every one of His promises!

If you’re trusting in Christ alone, then *Jesus will come and get us, and bring us home to glory, to live in His eternal salvation, His perfect Kingdom, for all of eternity! Where there is no more sin, sickness, evil, suffering, tears, or even death forever!*

What could be a better ending to the story? What’s a better “happily ever after” than that? It will be *glorious!* So press on, brothers and sisters, because all who trust in Christ, believing God’s Word and trusting in Jesus alone for salvation, *will be brought into the New Heavens and New Earth!*

But this also means that *only those who trust in Christ will be saved.* Anyone outside of Christ will be swept away into eternal judgment against our sin. Be assured, that day is surely coming! So I plead with you, don’t wait! He could come again tomorrow! Or, you might not even live to see tomorrow! If you’re not a believer, don’t wait: *turn away from your sin, turn away from the false hopes of this world or any false teaching, and turn to Christ alone;* trust in his perfect life, death on the cross in place of your sins, and resurrection from the dead as sufficient to save you from eternal judgment! Rest in His grace through faith, and you will be saved!

If you have any questions about this gospel and becoming a Christian, or if you’re interested in being baptized or joining the church, I would love to speak with you! YOU can come now, or find me after the service. Let us pray.