

THE “IN-BETWEEN” TIME (PT. 1) MATTHEW 24:3-14

In the past eighteen months, if I’ve heard it once I’ve heard it a thousand times: “Jesus must be coming very soon.” Because there is another word that if I’ve heard it once I’ve heard it *ten* thousand times in the past eighteen months— “Unprecedented!” We are experiencing an unprecedented global pandemic, unprecedented weather, unprecedented catastrophes, unprecedented racial tension, unprecedented political disunity and strife, etc.

In the last eighteen months many of the things we thought were nailed down have come loose. Things we thought would never happen *are* happening, and they are happening with an astonishing degree of frequency. And these things have forced us to face something that some of us have never had to face before—an acute sense of our own vulnerability. A realization that bad things can happen that are beyond our control and that no amount of preparation or precaution can prevent.

For Christians, who believe in a God who is ultimately going to make things new and make things right—who is ultimately going to eradicate evil and pain and suffering—this present turmoil naturally leads us to wonder about His intervention. Especially because the Bible predicts that just prior to Jesus’ Second Coming things in the world will go from bad to worse. So, when we see and experience devastation and deterioration, we surmise that His coming must be imminent.

That is natural. It is appropriate. But is it true?

Let me say, first of all, it *might* be true. Jesus could, indeed, come at any time. But I hasten to add that Christians have been feeling this way and wondering these things since Jesus ascended into heaven two thousand years ago. It started with Jesus’ disciples, and it has been on the minds of thoughtful believers in every generation since. Jesus knew this would be on our minds, so He addressed this matter in a lengthy discourse with His disciples just a couple of days before He died and left this world.

During the week leading up to the Passover, when Jerusalem was full of pilgrims from all over the world, Jesus had been going to the Temple each day where He taught, performed miracles, and interacted with the leaders of Judaism. On Wednesday, Jesus left the temple for the very last time and went to the Mount of Olives with His disciples, presumably on His way back to Martha and Mary’s house in Bethany. While ascending the Mount of Olives, with Jerusalem in view, in response to the disciples’ questions about what was going to happen in the future, Jesus sat down and delivered an address that we commonly refer to as *The Olivet Discourse*.

Look at **verse 3**. 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?”*

In the Old Testament, descriptions of the end of the age were often associated with wars, cosmic battles, famines, earthquakes, and other catastrophic events (Wilkins, 773). You may recall that Jesus had just finished telling the disciples that the Temple in Jerusalem would be completely and utterly destroyed. In their minds, this was *the* most terrible, catastrophic event they could think of, which is probably why they asked these two questions. When will the Temple be destroyed, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? For them, these events were inseparably linked.

Remember, the disciples still did not completely understand Jesus’ predictions about His death and resurrection. They certainly would not have understood the concept of Jesus’

glorious Second Coming at this time. And so, it is likely that they assumed the temple would be destroyed immediately, and that Jesus would begin His messianic reign in Jerusalem shortly thereafter. Perhaps they were wondering if the trauma of the temple's destruction would cause the Jews to unify around Jesus as their Deliverer and King.

In the following passage, which includes all of chapters 24 and 25, Jesus responds to their questions and gives them, and us, some clues as to how future events will unfold. And, trust me, they will unfold in a very different way than the disciples expected. In the first part of this passage (the part we will study this morning), Jesus gives a preview of the general conditions on earth that characterize the entire period of time *before* His coming. We are currently living in that age, and, thus far, it has been going on for more than two thousand years.

Look at **verses 4-5**. 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.*

Even before Jesus came to earth, many self-proclaimed messiahs had asserted themselves into the Jewish consciousness, attempting to incite revolution against the occupying forces in Israel. Jesus warns that this will continue after He is gone, and that some of these false messiahs will be very convincing.

Thus, Jesus gives a stern admonition. *"See to it that no one leads you astray!"* Which suggests that some of these imposters will be so persuasive that even Jesus' own followers are vulnerable to believing their claims and following their leadership. Therefore, Jesus says, you must be vigilant, you must be discerning, you must *not* be gullible. You must not allow yourselves to be duped, tricked, deceived, or easily taken-in by these shysters.

What is so disturbing about this is that Jesus predicts *many* will be led astray by these false messiahs. And included in the "many" (as we shall see later in the passage) are people who are professing Christians, people who claim to be followers of the true Messiah.

So, here's a question for you: Can *you* distinguish between the true Messiah and false messiahs? Or can you be duped?

Nobody likes to think of themselves as gullible. Very few would admit to being dupable. Oh, we can clearly see this trait in others, and we often criticize them for it. But we tend to think of ourselves as informed and discerning, and therefore impervious to deception. "I would never believe something that is not true. I would never fall for a false prophet or follow a false messiah."

And yet gullibility is a common human trait, and it is rampant in our culture—a culture that, ironically, is the most sophisticated and informed culture that has ever existed. There is an alarmingly high percentage of people who believe false narratives and embrace conspiracy theories and swallow misinformation, hook, line, and sinker. And many are professing Christians who think they are immune to such things!

Furthermore, it is very difficult to convince people who have been misled that they have been misled. Once they have been misled, they are convinced that what they believe is right, and you cannot convince them otherwise, no matter how logical or reasonable your argument. In fact, they accuse *you* of being misled because you don't agree with them.

Which is why we need to take Jesus' warning seriously. We can be misled more easily than we realize. And when we are misled, we are in danger of becoming entrenched in that deception and falling away from the faith. More about this later.

Look now at **verse 6**. 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..."* Since the Old Testament and other popular Jewish

writings (e.g. 2 Esdras 9:1-6) predict that wars will precede the end of the age, it is natural for Christ-followers to wonder if Jesus' return is imminent every time they hear about a war. But Jesus tells His disciples, and us, that wars and rumors of wars will be the norm during the in-between time (the time between Jesus' First and Second Coming). So, He is telling them not to be alarmed when they hear about them.

And why might Christians be alarmed? Because wars *seem* to contradict the notion that God is in control and that His kingdom in this world is progressing. They *seem* to suggest that human governments, not God, are determining the fate of this earth realm. But that is not true. Wars *will* be prevalent during this in-between time, but Christ followers can rest assured, knowing that God is in control and that His purposes are progressing according to His perfect plan.

Look now at **verses 7b-8**. *"...And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.* I'm pretty sure that this reference to famines and earthquakes typifies all kinds of natural disasters, including floods, fires, tsunamis, volcanoes, etc. Jesus is making the point that cataclysmic events like these often produce fear and make people wonder if the end is near. But He says that these things will be the norm during the "in-between" period of His first and second coming. They shouldn't alarm us, nor should they make us think, necessarily, that Jesus must be returning immediately.

Jesus says that these are but the *beginning* of birth pains. Every expectant mother wishes their child was born after the first contraction, but they know there will be many more. This metaphor highlights that an expectant mother has to endure multiple contractions, and that no one can predict how many she will have before the baby comes. It may come on the fifth, the fifteenth, the fiftieth, or the five hundredth labor pain. "In the same way, wars, earthquakes, famines, and other catastrophes wash over the landscape of history in repeated pains. Each one reminds us that the end is coming, but no one knows when until the Son of Man appears" (Wilkins, 773-774).

So be patient, says Jesus, and persevere during this time. Many bad things are going to happen in this "in-between" age. Even big, bad things, like the destruction of the temple that occurred in AD 70. But these are only the beginning of birth pains, and they will continue to occur during the entire age.

Jesus goes on in the next several verses to shift His focus from the suffering the world will experience in this "in-between" age to the suffering His followers will experience during this same period. **Verse 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.*

A mandatory course at the Christian university I attended was called *Biblical Foundations*. A portion of that class was devoted to teaching students how to present the gospel, and one of the course requirements was that we had to do a certain number of hours of door-to-door evangelism. I'm not sure who came up with the idea of door-to-door evangelism, but I'm pretty sure it was modeled after a concept that was fairly successful in those days—door-to-door sales.

The concept of door-to-door sales is that a salesperson pitches a product by trying to convince a customer that it will make his/her life better, easier, more productive, more comfortable, more enjoyable. That was essentially the same pitch we were taught to give—"God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, and if you follow Jesus, you will get this, and this, and this, and this..."

Can you imagine Jesus doing door-to-door evangelism? "God loves you and has a

very painful plan for your life. If you follow me, you will be persecuted, hated, and might even be killed.” That is exactly what Jesus forecasts for His followers during the time between his first and second coming. Not exactly “Your Best Life Now.”

Jesus says, *“They will deliver you up to tribulation.”* Inherent in the meaning of this word, tribulation, is the idea of intense suffering and pain. The “they” in this passage refers to people in authority, and “deliver you up” is a reference to a formal, official process. So, Jesus is talking about state-sponsored persecution. And this persecution may be so intense that some believers might be killed.

Christ followers will also be the objects of hatred, not from just a few random individuals, but by *all* nations. In other words, this will be a universal hatred that emanates from every nation and people group on the planet. Jesus warned his disciples earlier about this (10:22), and when he did, he gave the same reason for this hatred. It is on account of Jesus’ name; it is because of their association with Jesus; it is because they bear Jesus’ name.

Why would that produce hatred? Jesus put it simply in John 3. *19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” (3:19-21).*

It is not easy being the objects of hatred and the targets of persecution. But this *is* the cost of discipleship, and we must be prepared for it. And, just so we’re clear, this is not persecution or hatred toward a “Christian” because He refuses to wear a mask during a pandemic or because she is an anti-vaxxer, though I have heard people try to make that connection. This is purely because of one’s identification with Christ. We have His values, we display His character, we express His love, we speak His truth—and it is those things that get us into trouble because they make evil people squirm.

But Jesus goes on to tell us that not everyone who professes to be a Christian is going to endure persecution and suffering. **Verse 10:** *10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.*

This may be the most distressing prediction yet. During the time between Jesus’ first and second coming, because of an unwillingness to endure persecution, many who profess to be Jesus’ followers will fall away from the faith. Matthew uses a word that He has used many times before, skandalizo, and here, in the passive voice, it means “to be caused to stumble,” or “to be tripped.” It is a metaphor, and it describes a person who becomes spiritually disoriented so that he/she can no longer walk straight. It describes a person who falls out of step or out of line, here, in this context, it refers to a professing Christian falling away from the faith.

You may remember that when Jesus told the parable of the soils, He described seed that was sown on rocky soil, which quickly withered. When He explained the meaning to His disciples, He said, *20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. (Matt. 13:20-21).* The word translated “falls away” is the same word, skandalizo.

And as if this isn’t tragic enough, these ones who have fallen away from the faith, in order to save their own skin, will turn on other Christ followers and betray them; literally; “deliver them up” (the same word used in verse 9). The idea here is that these former

followers of Jesus become whistle blowers and turn in their former friends who are still following Jesus, so that the true believers are further harassed and persecuted.

But that's not all. They don't just betray their former friends; they actively hate them. They now feel disdain and animosity toward them, which proves they never really belonged to Jesus in the first place. For love is the defining characteristic and the identifying mark of Jesus' followers. All true followers of Christ *love* one another. Listen to what the Apostle John said, ¹⁴ *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.* ¹⁵ *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 Jn 3:14-15).*

Once again, Jesus is painting a picture about what the world will be like and what it will be like for His followers during the time between His first and second coming, the time in which we are now living. It is not a pretty picture. It is dark. It is bleak. It is full of pain and suffering and heartache.

What strikes me most about these predictions is that Jesus knew in advance what was going to happen. He knew things on this earth would go from bad to worse even after He died on the cross and rose from the dead. He knew that His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead—the events that would defeat our ultimate enemies of sin, Satan, and death—would *not* put an immediate end to the world's woes. The world would be ripe with deception, deterioration, and devastation. Sin's destructive forces would continue to wreak havoc, causing enormous pain and suffering. After His death and resurrection. After His ascension into heaven where He sat down at the right hand of God.

It sure doesn't seem like victory over sin, and Satan and death. It seems like those things are getting the upper hand, and that Jesus *knew* they would.

But I want to submit to you that this is part of this upside-down kingdom we have been learning about in Matthew.

It may seem otherwise, but even with all the evil that has occurred and is occurring in this age, Jesus is on the move. Slowly at times, inconspicuously at times, but He is steadily advancing, and He is using His people, the church, to accomplish His purposes. He is actively and mightily at work during this in between time, the time between His first and second coming. It is not always visible to us, none of us knows the extent to which He is working. But we can rest assured that He will have His way. For the One who accurately predicted an age of widespread deception, deterioration, and destruction, also predicted that He will ultimately have His way. He will eventually eradicate evil from the face of this earth. He will eventually reign unrivaled in absolute righteousness. And when He does, the wait will have been worth it. For we are told in Isaiah the prophet, *"He will see the travail of his soul and be satisfied"* (53:11).

Next week, Lord willing, I will be presenting Part 2 of this message entitled, "The 'In-Between' Time." Jesus predicts a few more distressing things that will occur in the age between His first and second comings. But He also gives a couple of promises, including *"The one who endures to the end will be saved."* (v. 12). And *"The gospel will be preached to all nations"* (v. 14). Even as persecution and hostility intensify and global conditions deteriorate, the church will increase in power, witness, and impact in the world. Jesus already said that in Matthew 16. *"I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it"* (Matt. 16:18).

I told you earlier that in the last eighteen months if I've heard it once I've heard it a thousand times: "Jesus must be coming very, very soon." I told you that I'm hearing this because of our perception that we are living in a time when unprecedented things keep

occurring.

Frankly, unprecedented things have happened in every generation since Jesus was on earth. The destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the murders of every Apostle, the Fall of Rome, the Crusades, an Islamic Mosque built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Black Plague, World Wars 1 and 2.

I'm not sure things are as bad today as what people in previous generations have had to endure. What I can say for sure is that Jesus is coming, and we ought to be ready each and every day for His arrival. For it could happen any day—even today.

The “In-Between” Time

Matthew 24:3-14

Main Idea: Between the time of Jesus' first and second advents, there will be great distress and destruction in the world and the Christian community, necessitating vigilance and endurance from Christ followers.

The time leading up to Jesus' return

Normal occurrences in the world (5-8)

“False Christs” will appear and deceive many (5a)

International hostilities will abound (6-7a)

Famines and earthquakes will be prevalent (7b-8)

Normal occurrences in the Christian community (9-13)

Persecution and martyrdom (9)

Widespread apostasy (10a)

Betrayal and hatred (10b)

Proliferation of false prophets (11)

Increasing lawlessness leading to lovelessness (12)

The necessity of endurance (13)

A sign of Christ's imminent return (14)

Principles from this passage:

- Jesus predicted the “in-between” time in which we are now living, and all His predictions have come true
- The period of time prior to Christ's return will be characterized by a growing polarization between good and evil
- God's people will increase in power, witness, and impact in the world, even as persecution and hostility intensify and global conditions deteriorate
- Not all who profess Christ persevere, but those who persevere demonstrate they truly belong Christ
- The gospel must be preached to all nations (people groups) before Jesus comes