

ANYTIME NOW
MATTHEW 24:29-35

In our exposition of Matthew's Gospel, we are currently studying chapters 24 and 25 in which Jesus is responding to three questions His disciples asked Him regarding what will happen in the future. I told you last time that we cannot fully appreciate the disciples' questions and Jesus' answers without understanding the influence of Old Testament prophecies that were familiar to every Jew in the first century, the most prominent of which came from Daniel's apocalyptic visions that are recorded in the last half of the book that bears His name.

In chapter 7, Daniel receives a vision of four ferocious beasts, representing four powerful empires that will rule the world, each more formidable and foreboding than the one before. Through violence and subjugation, these empires would dominate the world, and each would oppress the people of God who are living at the time of their rule. But Daniel's vision concludes with God's dramatic and decisive intervention through One who is likened to "a son of man" and is appointed by God to reign over an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace.

We read in **verses 13-14**: ¹³ *"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

When reading Daniel 7, the people of Jesus' day understood the four beasts in Daniel's vision to be four consecutive empires that ruled the world from Daniel's day until the present. The lion with eagles' wings was the Babylonian Empire, the bear with the three ribs in its mouth was the Medo-Persian Empire, the four-headed leopard was the Greek Empire, and the strange beast with iron teeth and ten horns is the Roman Empire.

It would be natural for the reader of Daniel 7 to assume that the kingdom ruled by the "son of man" would begin immediately after the demise of the Roman Empire. That's because in the prophecy Rome conquered Greece and *immediately* began to reign, Greece conquered Persia and *immediately* began to reign, and Persia conquered Babylon and *immediately* began to reign.

Which brings us back to the questions the disciples asked Jesus in the beginning of Matthew 24. They believed Jesus was that "son of man" in Daniel 7. They believed that He would be the king in that everlasting kingdom in Daniel's vision. And after what Jesus had just told them about the Temple being destroyed, which they undoubtedly assumed would be Rome's doing, they expected that Jesus' kingdom would be established immediately thereafter.

So, when they asked, "When will these things be?" or more specifically, "When will the Temple be destroyed?" they figured it would happen very soon. And when they asked, "What will be the sign of your coming?" and "What will be the sign of the end of the age?" they thought that Jesus' emergence as the Messiah would be in response to Rome's desecration and destruction of the Temple, and that He would immediately crush them, vindicate God's honor, and then establish an everlasting kingdom in Jerusalem.

Jesus knew that this is what they were thinking. And He responds by telling them that future events, including His emergence as the unrivaled King of kings, would *not* unfold with the kind of immediacy the disciples anticipated. There would be an indeterminate period of

time between Jesus first coming to earth, and what the disciples would later learn would be His second coming to earth. In that period of time a number of things would occur that would seem incongruent with God's reign. It would be a time of great chaos and confusion. There would be widespread international hostilities, devastating catastrophes, and moral deterioration. There would be a proliferation of false prophets and fake messiahs, and there would be pervasive persecution of Jesus' followers, resulting in many deaths. However, during this troubling time the gospel would advance and be proclaimed in every nation before the end.

In answer to the disciples' first question, "When will the Temple be destroyed?" Jesus predicted an invasion of Jerusalem by an army that would desecrate and destroy the Temple. I suggested to you that Jesus was referring to the events of A.D. 66-70, which happened thirty-five to forty years after Jesus said these words. But when making this prediction, Jesus was careful to point out that the desecration of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem was *not* the sign of His coming. He is not going to come before the siege in Jerusalem, neither will the destruction of the Temple be a "sign" of his immediate coming or "the end of the age," for when this all unfolds Jesus said, "If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it" (24:23, 26).

That brings us to the passage we are going to study this morning. Look at **verses 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.*

Whereas in the previous passage (vv. 15-28) Jesus answers the disciples' first question, "When will these things be?" or more specifically, "When will the Temple be destroyed?" now He begins to answer their second question, "What will be the sign of your coming?" And when He says, "immediately after the tribulation of those days," He is referring, I believe, to the tribulation that He has been describing beginning in verse 5—a reference to the entire period of time between Jesus' first and second comings (what theologians call, "the interadvent period").

Immediately after that period of time, and just prior to Jesus' second coming, **verse 29**, *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*. These words are drawn from Isaiah (13:10; 34:4), where the language of cosmic upheaval symbolized the political fall of pagan nations (Kroll). In other words, this language is not to be taken as a literal, scientific description of what will actually happen to the sun, moon, and stars, but as a vivid metaphor, in the same way that we speak of earth-shaking or earth-shattering developments.

Jesus wants His disciples to know that even though political and demonic powers (often associated in paganism by the sun, moon, and stars) will inflict much damage and destruction in the indeterminate period of time before Jesus comes, a day is coming when their power and influence will be extinguished by the supreme power and absolute sovereignty of King Jesus.

Look at **verse 30**. *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.*

The disciples had asked in verse 3, “What will be the sign of your coming?” Jesus directly answers that question in verse 30. He says the sign will be the appearance of Jesus Himself in heaven (the sky). In other words, the “sign” of Jesus’ coming *is* His coming! Jesus wants His disciples to know that there will be *no* advance sign of Jesus’ coming that would enable us to predict the exact time. He comes when He comes, and the people who are then alive will know it when it happens (Kroll).

How will they know? Because His coming will be visible to all the tribes of the earth. I believe “tribes” (which can also be translated “nations” or “peoples”) refers to every people group on the face of the earth. Everyone who is alive at the time will see Him come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Does this language sound familiar? Twice in verse 30 Jesus refers to the One who appears in the heavens as “the Son of Man.” Jesus, who frequently referred to Himself as the Son of Man throughout His earthly ministry, is undoubtedly, in the context of this glorious coming on the clouds, declaring Himself to be the Person in Daniel’s vision in chapter 7—the one “like a son of man” who is appointed by God to reign over an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace. And you can be sure this was not lost on His disciples. Jesus is the fulfillment of the heaven-sent king in Daniel’s prophecy.

But notice, His coming will have a polarizing effect on the people who are living at that time. Many will *mourn* His coming. They will mourn because they have rejected Him as God’s Messiah and King, and they will spend eternity separated from Him and His blessing. His coming will seal their tragic fate. Jesus will have much more to say about this later in chapters 24 and 25.

But Jesus’ coming will be a time of great rejoicing for God’s elect, which refers to those who have believed in Jesus and put their trust in Him. For when Jesus appears in the heavens, **verse 31**, ***31 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.***

Notice that at the time of Jesus’ coming the elect will be living throughout the whole earth, signifying that the gospel will have been preached throughout the entire world (24:14) and that at least some people from every nation tribe and tongue will have believed in Jesus. This is what is meant by the metaphor, “the four winds,” which is reinforced the phrase, “one end of heaven to another.” Jesus is simply saying that every single person who belongs to Him will be gathered to be with Him, no matter how remote their residence here on earth. Not one of His chosen ones will be overlooked or left behind.

Jesus goes on to answer the disciples third question, “What will be the sign of the end of the age?” Look at **verses 32-33**. ***32 “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. 33 So also, when you see all these things, you know that He is near, at the very gates.***

Most trees in first-century Palestine kept their leaves throughout the year, but not the fig tree. This tree sheds its leaves in winter, but when spring arrives its branches becomes tender and put forth leaves. The fig tree does not bring the summer, but the appearance of its new leaves is a sure and certain indication that summer is now at hand (Morris, PNTC).

In the same way, all the events of Matthew 24 point to the nearness of Christ’s return. But nearness, here, does not necessarily mean that it is going to happen immediately, but simply that everything is in place for it to happen at any time. The word for this is “imminence,” and theologians call this “the imminent return of Christ.” There is nothing more in God’s plan of redemption that must occur before the end can come (Blomberg, NAC). So, Jesus could come at any time.

Verses 34-35. *³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Verse 34 has been one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted verses in the whole Bible. That is because many have interpreted it with reference to Jesus' second coming. So, it would either mean that His disciples would live to see Jesus' glorious second coming on the clouds of heaven, which obviously did not happen, or that there are events that will occur at some point that will trigger a countdown to Christ's return, and that once those events occur, Jesus will return within the span of a generation—30-40 years. Many so-called "prophecy experts" in the seventies asserted that the rebirth of the nation of Israel in 1948 was that trigger that began the countdown. That would have meant, however, that Jesus should have returned by 1988 at the latest.

It seems to me that the key to understanding what Jesus meant by "this generation not passing away," is to understand His reference to "all these things." "All these things" in verse 34 must refer to "all these things" of verse 33, which show that Christ's return is near, and which therefore cannot include Christ's return itself. "All these things," then, refers to everything described in chapter 24 except the Second Coming itself, described in verses 27-31 (Blomberg).

When did all the things that Jesus described in verses 4-26 occur? They occurred within the generation of His audience. Many of the apostles were alive to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. They all saw and experienced earthquakes and famines, wars and rumors of wars, the persecution and martyrdom of fellow believers, false prophets and fake messiahs. In fact, I would suggest to you that after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the stage was set for Jesus to come at any time, except for one thing. According to verse 14, before Jesus comes the gospel will be preached to every nation. That is an explicit condition that must be met before the end comes.

Verse 35 concludes the first half of Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives by stressing the certainty of everything that Christ has outlined. *³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Jesus' words will endure even longer than the universe itself, which will be destroyed and re-created. Jesus wanted His disciples to know some of the details about the temple's destruction, without specifying when it would occur, and to make it plain that from that moment on, the end of the age, signaled by Christ's return, can come at any time (Blomberg).

Jesus does not want His disciples to be caught off guard, and He does not want them to become disillusioned when events and circumstances happen in Jerusalem and on earth that don't seem congruent with His reign as Messiah. He wants them to know that there will be a time of great tribulation and great suffering, but that these things must happen as part of God's plan to glorify Himself and His Son.

The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the destruction of the temple, and the death of many Jewish religious leaders (and at least some of the apostles) must have been a surprise to the church. It is almost certain the church believed that Jesus would return right after these events. But He did not return, and some Christians must have been disturbed by this fact.

However, the *Olivet Discourse* teaches us that much more had to happen than just the destruction of the city and temple before Jesus would return. The main theme of Matthew 24 is Jesus' warning that His disciples always need to be spiritually ready precisely because they *cannot* know when He will return. In verse 36, Jesus said *³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only"*

(24:36). This is Jesus' plain statement that He did not know when the end of the age would come. That may seem shocking, since He was the Son of God, but nonetheless it is clear.

Accepting this point clears up a lot of confusion about chapter 24. It tells us that Jesus was not meaning to prophesy about the specific time of "the end" or of His return, since He Himself did not know when it would be. Matthew 24 was to be a lesson in *spiritual* awareness, not nailing down specific times or dates.

Jesus wanted His disciples and future followers like us to know how we could be prepared to live *today* in light of what is going to happen in the future, and to know that, in the end, God wins, God's people are saved, and everything is going to be okay.

Thirty years after Jesus said these words to His disciples, one of them, Peter, wrote a letter to Christ-followers who were experiencing precisely what Jesus predicted would happen. And He gave them this admonition: "*Prepare your minds for action, be self-controlled, set you hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed*" (1 Pet. 1:13).

Peter is talking about living in the light of Christ's return. "Prepare your minds for action". The literal translation of this phrase is, "Gird up the loins of your mind", which demands a bit of explanation.

Men who lived in ancient times did not wear blue jeans or khakis. They wore full-length robes that went from their neck down to their feet, with a wide belt or sash tied around their waists. These robes were comfortable, versatile garments. But they were not very practical if you had to move suddenly or quickly. In that case it was easy to get your feet tangled up in the robe, causing you to trip and perhaps even fall flat on your face.

And so, the men in this day learned to gird up their loins—to gather the skirt of their robes and tuck them inside their belts so that their legs would not be restricted, and they could move about freely.

This was especially true of a soldier. In fact, a soldier was required to leave his tunic tucked inside his belt at all times so that he could be prepared to act at a moment's notice. His safety, and the safety of those he was charged with protecting, depended on it.

Peter is saying here, "Fellow soldiers of Christ, don't be caught with your robe down! Be vigilant, be alert, be ready. Don't allow yourself to be ambushed by circumstances or events that might trip you up and cause you to fall on your face. Don't miss the opportunities that are put before you. Be ready to respond! Be prepared for action!"

And the kind of preparation He's talking about here is mental. He's saying in effect, "As a follower of Christ you can't afford to be mentally lax or lazy. You're going to need all of your mental faculties—you're going to need to keep your antennae tuned to what is going on around you if you're going to live effectively in this world.

If there is one thing that the events of the past eighteen months have revealed, it is that things can happen in a moment that can be spiritually disorienting. Pandemics, earthquakes, fires, ice-storms, drought, famine, etc. As we have seen so often, these things can result in the loss and destruction of homes, properties, and life itself.

I heard someone say, "We ought to live as though Christ died yesterday and is coming back tomorrow". We need to set our hope fully on the grace to be given us when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Anytime Now **Matthew 24:29-35**

Main Idea: *The stage is set for Jesus to return to the earth as the Judge of unbelievers and Savior of His followers.*

On the heels of Jerusalem's destruction (29-31)

Chaos in the cosmos (29)

The meaning of these metaphors

When they will occur

The glorious appearance of Jesus (30-31)

The sign of His coming is His coming (30a)

The nations will mourn (30b)

For they will encounter their Judge

For they will regret their unbelief

Jesus will gather His elect (31)

Angel gatherers

From the remotest places on earth

The "nearness" of Christ's return (32-35)

The lesson of the fig tree (32)

The meaning of "near" (33)

"This generation" and "all these things" (34)

The permanence and certainty of Jesus' words (35)