

We've been studying the Gospel of Matthew, which is essentially a biography of Jesus. We come today to chapter 24 — one of the most debated chapters in all the Bible. Jesus is speaking privately with just his closest followers. There's an atmosphere of intensity. He's just a day or two away from his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. He needs to prepare them for what's ahead. Not just what will happen to him in the next few days, but what will happen to them and his followers in the days, weeks, and even years ahead.

Jesus was so much more than a prophet, but here we see him functioning as a prophet. He's looking into the future with incredible accuracy. One of the debates over this chapter has to do with how far ahead is Jesus looking.

Some (Preterists) say what Jesus predicted in this passage has already taken place. It all happened between the time of this resurrection and the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70; all within 40 years of his death and has nothing to do with his return or the last days of history. Others (Futurists) have the opposite view. They say everything Jesus predicts here has to do with the last days of history, what we call "the end times." Finally, there's a third group that says, "It's both and." They say Jesus is describing both events leading up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, and the last days before his return. This is the club I belong to.

Think of it this way: You're standing on a mountaintop, staring across to another mountaintop, and even another. It appears the peaks are quite close to each other when in fact they're miles apart. In the same way, Jesus is gazing into the future, looking at two mountaintops, and describing them as if they're quite close together, when in fact, they're separated by thousands of years.

One thing is for sure, Jesus' ability to speak accurately about the future is on display. Just think, Jesus could even accurately predict the winner of Super Bowl 53! I've heard it said, "We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future." That may be true, but Jesus shows us, not only does he know who holds the future, he knows "what" the future holds. And even though he sees some dark days ahead for his followers, the fact that he knows these things and holds them, steadies us.

People say, "Jesus is Lord" but what does that mean? Well, it means nothing if he's not the Lord of history and not just history in general, but your history.

Some believe history isn't going anywhere. It's impossible to make any sense of it. At best it's cyclical; it just keeps repeating itself, but it's going nowhere. Those of an evolutionary bent are more optimistic, believing humankind is always weeding out the bad, moving upward, getting

better. But Christ-followers have always believed Jesus is the Lord of history. History began when he created the heavens and the earth. It reached a pinnacle when he came to this earth as a man to rescue us through the cross and resurrection. Now it's being drawn toward a specific conclusion as we wait for his return and the renewal of all things. History is guided by divine providence to an ultimate purpose or goal.

How do you view history? Are you afraid of what's ahead? Are you excited? Christ-followers believe he holds the future in his hands. With that in mind, let's dive into what Jesus said here in Matthew 24. We'll be looking at vv. 1-28 this week, and vv. 29-51 next week.

Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. v. 1

Jesus just lambasted the religious leaders, and now he was walking away from Jerusalem like he was washing his hands of them. Then it's almost like his disciples wanted to cheer him up by pointing out the temple. "Look at that temple, Jesus, isn't it amazing?" Peter probably wanted to take a selfie! By the way, the temple was impressive. It was one of the wonders of the Roman world. It took almost 50 years to build. It looked like a mountain of gold sitting atop Mt. Moriah. The Jewish historian, Josephus, said when the sun shone on it "it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes..." Some of its stones were as large as an SUV!

But listen to what Jesus said in response.

"Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." v. 2

What a downer! But that's quite a prediction! And he was right. In AD 70 the Romans invaded the city and ordered both the city and this awesome temple razed to the ground. Soldiers first gutted it by fire and then pulled the stones apart to reclaim the melted gold. The disciples had to be stunned at Jesus prophecy. This is like you and me taking a tour of Washington DC. We're filled with national pride: The White House, Lincoln Memorial, and The Washington Monument. But then your tour guide pipes up and says, "You see all of this? It'll all be gone in 40 years." It's not just the buildings, but all they represent. For the Jews, this temple represented their God and all they held dear.

So, later, as they sat down on the Mt. of Olives with a view of the temple below, they questioned him.

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will

this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” v. 3

Notice they ask two separate questions here. First, when will this happen? When will the temple be destroyed? In their minds, this couldn't happen until the end of history, so they ask a second question: What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age? Jesus goes on and answers both of those questions.

Jesus prepares his followers for birth pains to come

He begins telling them about a whole bunch of hard things that will happen, but they're not signs the end has come.

Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. vv. 4-14

Several things will happen. Jesus said there would be many false Christ's and false prophets who will deceive many. Down through history many have either claimed to be Christ or made claims about themselves that are only true of Christ. Most recently there has been Joseph Smith, Sun Myung Moon, Jim Jones, and David Koresh.

Jesus also described wars and rumors of wars as nation rises against nation. Historian, Will Durant, wrote a few years back, “War is one of the constants of history, and isn't diminished with civilization and democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history, only 268 have seen no war.” Recent history hasn't added to that number!

Then Jesus described natural disasters like famines and earthquakes. Just in the last two years, we've seen unimaginable famines in South Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia. And earthquakes — I guess California is in the Bible after all! But earthquakes took place in Jesus' day too. Not long after Jesus said this, there was a huge earthquake in Laodicea where many were killed.

I know this sounds bleak, but there's one more thing. Jesus said there would be persecution for his followers. God's people won't be “bubble wrapped” during this time. Just read the book of Acts. The disciples were imprisoned and brought before the authorities. And it has been happening ever since. In May, we heard of coordinated attacks on three Indonesian churches during worship, leaving more than a dozen dead. In October, we read of a 15-year-old Nigerian girl, Leah Sharibu, captured by Boko Haram, facing death because she refused to renounce her

faith. Unfortunately, not everyone will be so faithful. Jesus said many will turn from the faith; their love will grow cold; they'll even betray other followers.

So, Jesus predicted with incredible accuracy what life would be like, not just for his twelve disciples, but for all subsequent generations of disciples. We often associate these things with the end, but notice Jesus said, “Such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (v. 6b). And then he said, “All these are the beginnings of birth pains” (v. 8). Birth pains — on the one hand, that's discouraging because it means things will get worse. But, on the other hand, it's encouraging.

Over the course of my life, I've witnessed three births, all my own children. Obviously, I haven't experienced childbirth firsthand, but Lynn has three times. She's also been there when each of our five grandchildren were born. She knows better than me that childbirth is long, messy, and painful. But every day, women all over the planet, endure the pain of childbirth because they know the end result: a beautiful baby.

Jesus said this process of giving birth, with all the contractions, anguished cries, sweat, and blood, is an apt picture for the birth of the kingdom of God. It's almost like evil won't give up without a fight. False messiahs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution — these are the labor pains pointing to the birth of a new world; something as fresh and beautiful as a newborn baby!

Jesus prepares his disciples for the abomination of desolation

But, Jesus said, these are just the beginning of birth pains. In other words, things will get worse. He describes that next.

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you ahead of time. “So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather. vv. 15-28

What Jesus predicted here was the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. He mentioned an event familiar to his disciples — the abomination of desolation. This term comes from the Old Testament prophet, Daniel (9:27; 11:31). Daniel described a man who'd shame the temple

and leave it desolate. This would be an abomination to the Jewish people. And that was what happened. In AD 70, the Roman armies arrived in Jerusalem. They surrounded the city with flags bearing the image of the emperor they worshipped as a god — an abomination to Jews. Then the temple was leveled to the ground as Jesus predicted.

Again, this all came true in AD 70, but there are few hints indicating there might be another mountaintop beyond that. He said, the distress would be “unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (v. 21). That sounds more like the Great Tribulation at the end of time. More importantly, he talks of the unmistakable “coming of the Son of Man.” That word “coming” is *parousia*, used throughout the New Testament to speak of the Second Coming of Jesus to earth. Remember, the disciples asked him not just about the destruction of the temple but also his coming at the end of the age. So, it seems Jesus was also looking beyond that first mountaintop to another at the end of history when he would return, and a new world would be born.

Did you know there are over 300 verses in the New Testament about the Second Coming of Jesus? 300 verses! This is fundamental to our faith. But what I find interesting is most of us are more enamored by superheroes than by the coming of the Son of Man. Think of all the superhero movies that came out just last year: Black Panther, Ant-Man, Avengers, Aquaman, Deadpool, Incredibles, Venom, and Spider-Man. And there's more on the way!

I guess it makes sense. From a certain perspective, Jesus is a very disappointing superhero. Even if he did walk on water and heal a few people, that's not much to work with. I mean he can't even fly. He never stops the sun from exploding. He never heals any zombies. Instead, he gets mocked, pushed around, and eventually killed. But here we see a day is coming when he'll reveal himself as the ultimate superhero. “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (v. 27).

Have you ever stood and watched a lightning storm? Think of that. In fact, that term, “Son of Man” is the name of a superhero described on the Old Testament. Listen to how Daniel described his vision:

“I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13-14

That's how Daniel described the Messiah. That's Superhero language! Jesus is saying: “That's me!” The obvious question to ask ourselves is, so what? What are we to do about all this? How can we be prepared for what Jesus described here?

Jesus tells his followers what to do

There are three things I see here that Jesus says we should do.

First, we're to be discerning.

Go back up to v. 4. With regard to the false messiah's, he said, “Watch out that no one deceives you.” Later, in v. 23 he said, “If anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it.” Jesus even said they would perform signs, wonders, and deceive many. Let me ask, how spiritually gullible are you? Excuse my language, but do you have a built-in “crap-detector?” Can you see through the charade of those who claim to be a messiah, or a messenger, or a miracle worker? We must be more discerning. We must know the Word of God well enough that when something is off, we instinctively know it; we smell it. Those less discerning will swarm to false teachers like vultures to a carcass. Don't be with them!

Part of being discerning is not being alarmed by the birth pains we see around us. That's what Jesus said in v. 6. “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” Notice that word “must.” “Such things must happen.” That's a divine must. It means don't freak out; God is working out his plan. Everything is on schedule.

Lynn and I love to watch the PBS series, *Call the Midwife*. It's about a group of nuns and nurses working as midwives in a poor part of London in the 1940 and 50's. The coolest thing about them is they never freak out when a woman starts labor. Even if there's something wrong, something life-threatening, they calmly go about their work. That's what we're to do. In the midst of all the birth pains, don't freak out. He's in control. Everything's on schedule. When he arrives, you'll know it.

Second, we're to be obedient.

Look at the commands found in vv. 16-18 where Jesus told his followers what to do when they saw the abomination of desolation: “Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” If you're on a housetop, don't “go down to take anything out of the house.” In those days the housetop was like a family room. So, if you're up there hanging out and you see this happen, get out of town! Don't stop to gather even your most prized possessions. And pray all this doesn't happen in the winter or on the Sabbath because that might just give you more reason to hesitate.

You might think this would have been easy. I mean you see the mighty Roman army march into town about to kill and destroy, who wouldn't flee? But these were proud Jews. This was their city. This was their temple. And these gentiles were about to destroy everything. Cowards may run, but real patriots stay and fight. We see this instinct in Peter when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. He took out his sword and lopped off a soldier's ear! Jesus said, “Don't fight, but flee.” Church history tells us the believers in Jerusalem did flee when this happened in AD 70. They ran for the hills, and as a result, they survived. Soon after, the Romans left the region. The days had been “cut short,” as Jesus said, and his people (the elect) were saved or preserved.

Maybe something similar will happen again during what the Bible calls the Great Tribulation. But the important thing to see here is the importance of taking Jesus at his word even when it makes no sense. So often what he tells us to do is counter-intuitive. But if he really holds the future, why wouldn't we obey him? Why wouldn't we obey him in what

he says about prayer, money, marriage, sexuality, anger, injustice, humility, or worship? Let me ask you, in what areas of life are you tempted not to take Jesus at his word?

The hardest one for me is money. You know the old story about a thug who points a gun at a man and says, "Your money or your life." The guy is silent. The thug says it again, "I said, your money or your life!" The guy says, "Hold on, I'm thinking it over!" I can relate. But Jesus tells me, "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back" (Luke 6:30). Who lives like that? Quite often I don't. But I should because Jesus gives me every reason to obey him. There's one more thing. I'm glad because I want to leave you with something more hopeful.

The third thing is to have confidence.

Jesus said a couple things in the midst of all this that gives us hope. They come right in the middle — in vv. 13-14. In v. 13 he said in the midst of all this chaos, persecution, and apostasy, "...the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." We're not saved by our standing firm; we're saved by faith, but genuine faith will stand firm. This may come across to you as a challenge to endure, but it's not. It's a promise. Leon Morris said,

"These words contain a valid and valuable promise: the person described will be saved. The power of God is such that He can and will sustain his faithful servants through whatever trials they may be called upon to endure."

Sometimes it's hard for me to imagine how I'd endure what Jesus described here. Maybe I won't stand firm. But I believe when the moment comes, God will give me what I need to do just that. Notice Jesus said in v. 24 — false messiahs will appear to deceive, "if possible, even the elect." Why does he say, "if possible?" Because it's not possible. God will supply his people what we need to stand firm to the end.

Years ago, I ran a marathon. I trained and prepared for five months. But there is a part of a marathon you can't prepare for. A marathon is just over 26 miles. But when you train, the experts tell you not to run over 20 miles. So, the last six miles are no-man's-land. You don't really know what you'll do in those last six miles. You may "hit the wall." You may have cramps. You know it'll be tough. We read a passage like this, and it's like we're reading about the last six miles of a marathon. We wonder if we'll make it. There's nothing we can do now to quite replicate what it will be like then. But we have confidence that the One who called us will sustain us through every hardship.

Another thing Jesus said to give us hope is in v. 14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Jesus is now looking to a distant

mountaintop. All these birth pains and troubles won't impede the progress of the good news that God's kingdom has come in Jesus; that forgiveness is offered to all who believe; that he conquered death and will come again and give birth to a new heaven and a new earth. The truth of the matter is the gospel of the kingdom has always spread the most where it's opposed the most.

And so, as we think about the future and what we call "the end of the age," we can be confident Jesus knows the future and holds the future. He's the Lord of history. In fact, history is His-Story! And His-Story is good news, and it gives us hope. His people will endure! The good news will be proclaimed to every nation!

Our call isn't to decipher current events and figure out if this or that means Jesus' coming is right around the corner. Our call is to be ambassadors of this kingdom that's here but not fully here yet. Our call is to do everything we can to see this good news of the kingdom preached to all nations and all people groups.

That's why a team of us are going to India tomorrow. That's why you all gave over 85k to our Christmas outreach fund so 400 Indian pastors could attend our conference. You're not sending us there to sightsee. We're not going to take pictures of the Taj Mahal. We're going to be a small part of God's purposes in a world that desperately needs him, which he relentlessly loves.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2019 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1434-45FC