

Matthew Chapter 24

Jesus speaks about the future

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Hello, and welcome to the latest in our series of talks on Matthew's Gospel; and today we are looking at chapter 24 where Jesus speaks about the future. I cannot recall a time when more people in every walk of life are concerned about the future, both on an individual basis and in respect of the world in general. On an individual basis, as we in general live longer, there are challenges in respect of health and mobility in our latter years, coupled with the concerns raised by pandemics and how we deal with these and every other illness that we can encounter. On a global basis, there are wars, natural disasters, economic pressures, etc., and what seems like never ending political uncertainties all over the world. It is very clear that the answers to all these things are contained in Biblical prophecy. As Bible-believing Christians, we should be confident in our faith to face all these things. We should be able to say with assurance that we are unmoved by the anxieties that come because, as it were, we have read the end of the Book, and we know how it ends. Indeed, anything other than faith in God's word will only leave us anxious, frustrated, and fearful as we see these world events unfold.

The Bible, the inspired Word of God, tells us about the past, the present, and the future; and yet how few people, relatively speaking, seem to be interested in, or concerned about, what it has to say. The reasons for this are many, but two are certainly: that some people would say it is too complicated to understand; and that there are so many contrary views and opinions on it, so how do we know which to believe? These things may well be true to some extent, but the Bible instructs us regularly that we are to apply ourselves to these things and seek wisdom from God to understand them. It is often said that nothing worthwhile comes easy! The main writers that God used to give a clear picture of the events yet to take place in the future were Daniel in the Old Testament and John in the book of the Revelation in the New Testament. Many other prophets wrote about things that were to happen in the future from when they were writing and many of these things have already come to pass, but Daniel and John are the two predominate prophets of things yet to happen. The Lord Himself also had things to say about the future, and many of these things have now already come to pass, in particular those things in respect of His own death and resurrection. The chapter we are considering today, however, is practically all about things that have yet to happen. We should not be surprised or concerned that so many years have passed since the Lord uttered these words and they have still not happened. Remember how Peter wrote in his second epistle chapter 3 verses 8 and 9:

“But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

As we come into the specifics of Matthew chapter 24 then, it is vital that we keep some things in mind. Firstly, running through all scripture, are two very distinct groups of people: the people of Israel, God's ancient chosen earthly people; and the Church of God, God's heavenly people. It is

true that from the first group, i.e., the people of Israel, many have and will become part of the second group, i.e., the Church of God. But we will err and be confounded in the teachings of God's plans for the future if we conflate both of these groups of people as being one. The teachings of this chapter are primarily concerned with the people of Israel. Secondly, there are things in this chapter which resemble, sometimes very closely, things we can recognise in our world today, but these are being referred to here specifically in respect of a time yet to come. Two examples of this are in verse 24 where false Christs and false prophets are mentioned. Although Paul in his letters warns the Church against false Christs and prophets rising up, the Lord is referring here to a different time period when they will be prevalent, and I trust we will see this clearly as we go through this chapter. Similarly, we will read of wars, famines, and earthquakes, and as mentioned earlier, while we are seeing many of these things in our world today, this is not the period about which our Lord is talking in this chapter.

At the start of chapter 24 then, we see the Lord actually departing from the temple, for the last time, but we can also see this as being symbolic. He goes to the Mount of Olives and from here He can see the majesty of the temple, which many believe would have been one of the most magnificent buildings of its day. The construction of which had begun around 20 BC by Herod the Great, and it is thought it was still being added to and improved even when it was destroyed in AD 70 by the Roman General Titus. It is thought to have been made of white gleaming marble and its huge, imposing eastern wall was covered in gold plates that reflected the morning sun so that it would have been visible for miles. In the last few verses of the previous chapter, we have read of the Lord lamenting over Jerusalem because of the people's rejection of Him, so it is quite understandable why He now takes His disciples, those Jews who had accepted Him as the Messiah, to explain what will become of the temple and the Jewish nation. He now also takes the opportunity to elaborate on what He meant by His words in chapter 23 verse 38 when He said,

“Your house is left to you desolate.”

Not one stone of this impressive structure shall remain upon another, and they all will be thrown down! A prophecy that was soon to be brought to pass. When Titus destroyed the temple, it is said that fires were lit around the mighty walls that melted the gold and brought down the stones. The rubble that remained was then riddled in order for every piece of the precious gold to be retained; and the debris that was left was thrown into the Kidron Valley below. Of course, the disciples no doubt startled by this saying, wanted to know when this would be, what will be the sign of His coming, and the end of the age.

The disciples' questions spread out to far more than just when the temple will be destroyed and therefore the Lord's answer does likewise, without Him actually mentioning the simple answer of the physical destruction of the temple, which they saw from where they were currently seated. It is clear that these Jewish disciples still expected the imminent restoration of an earthly kingdom over which their Messiah would reign, so the temple being utterly destroyed did not fit with their expectation of how things would be. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the order of their questions in verse 3 was firstly about timings then signs. But the Lord answers the questions in reverse, talking firstly about signs from verse 4 through to verse 33 then addressing timings, and the challenges connected with them, from verse 34 to the end of the chapter. It is also interesting to note that the parable of the ten minas, that is recorded in Luke's Gospel chapter 19, is told by Jesus because, in verse 11, they thought the Kingdom of God would appear immediately. So we see clearly that the Lord's coming which, the disciples are asking about, is His physical coming to earth in order to set up His physical Kingdom.

In order to fully understand Matthew chapter 24 then, it is necessary to clarify that the coming of the Lord referred to in this chapter is an entirely different event to that which we read of in Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians chapter 4 and verses 15-18. Although there are some similarities, there are clear distinctions which show that what we refer to as the second coming of the Lord is in two parts. The first part of which is First Thessalonians 4:15-18 when the Lord

comes for His Church; the second part we have here in Matthew chapter 24 when the Lord comes with His Church. Let us just consider these clear differences now. In verse 30 of Matthew chapter 24 we read,

“They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven”,

but in First Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 17 we read,

“Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

So the Lord does not actually come onto the earth in this first part of His second coming. Secondly, in verse 31 of Matthew chapter 24 we read,

“And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

In First Thessalonians, however, we read in verse 16,

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.”

Thirdly, in Matthew chapter 24 there is no mention of resurrection of the dead, but in First Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 16 we read,

“And the dead in Christ shall rise first.”

Finally, the Lord in Matthew chapter 24, or indeed in any of the other Gospels when referring to His coming, does not detail the order in which believers, whether alive or dead, will be caught up to Him; but in First Thessalonians as we have just seen it does. The Lord’s coming for His Church was not revealed until the writings of the Apostle Paul. This is confirmed in First Corinthians chapter 15 verse 51 where Paul says,

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”

Another point that we need to keep in mind from Matthew chapter 24 is that the Gospel which is being referred to is not the same Gospel as we preach today. In verse 14 we read,

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”

The word Gospel comes from a word that means “good tidings.” So here we are hearing of the good tidings of the Kingdom of God that will one day be over all this sad earth when Christ reigns in and from Jerusalem for a thousand years. How wonderful when we see the problems that this world faces today and, as I said earlier, can only be fixed when this takes place. Today, however in this day of grace we proclaim the Gospel of Grace, that men and women can be saved by faith in Christ alone, through grace alone, to the glory of God alone. Since Christ died on the Cross of Calvary, was raised from the dead, and then ascended to Heaven, the focus of the good tidings of God changed from that of an earthly kingdom to come in the future to the blessing of believers today that will culminate in heavenly blessings for all eternity.

From verse 4 to 14 then, the Lord tells His disciples of the things that will happen to them and the disasters that will strike this world. But no matter how bad these things are, in verse 8 we are told that these are just the beginning of sorrows, things will get far worse before the end comes. We also have to keep in mind that these verses cover the period from which the Lord was talking right up until He comes to set up His Kingdom. He makes no mention of the Church age that we are

now in. These things are prophesied in great detail in the Book of Daniel chapter 9, when he was given a vision about the history of the Jewish nation from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem at the time of Artaxerxes, described as 70 weeks of years. History shows with astonishing accuracy that 69 weeks of years were up until the Lord was crucified. This timeclock has now been interrupted by the Church age, and the 70th week will then resume when Christ comes to rapture the Church to Heaven, as we have been thinking about in chapter 4 of First Thessalonians. So, in Matthew chapter 24, as in most of the Gospels in general, the Lord is talking about His earthly people, the Jews, not His Church.

In verse 14 then, the Lord explains that when the Gospel of the Kingdom has been preached in the whole world and gone out as a witness to the nations that the end will then come. In verse 8 He refers to the beginning of sorrows and this word "sorrows" literally means "birth pangs." So we have the start of labour pains, but now in verse 14 the end refers to the excruciating conclusion of these labour pains in what will be a three and a half year period called the Great Tribulation in verse 21. The start of which is signified by the "abomination of desolation" as is quoted in verse 15, where the Lord makes it clear He is quoting from Daniel. I always find it quite incredible that the Lord as a Man here, the Word incarnate, refers to the prophecies made centuries before by a mere mortal men, who were inspired to write these prophecies by Him in the first place! How gracious the Lord is to recognise the prophets that His ancient people already recognised to be such.

There are events that have happened in history which were very definitely a desecration or abomination of the Holy Place. In BC 168, the King of Syria Antiochus Epiphanes invaded Jerusalem and made the altar of the Temple into a shrine to Zeus, even making unholy offerings on it. Some may also think that this referred to AD 70, when the Emperor Titus destroyed the temple, as we have been already thinking. But the Apostle Paul in Second Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 3 and 4, and also the Apostle John in Revelation chapter 13 verses 14 and 15, very clearly look forward to this event as being future, when the Antichrist will actually set up an image of the beast of Revelation chapter verses 13 1-7 in the temple for people to worship. At this point the godly Jewish remnant must recognise that the end is near and flee for their lives, as verses 16 to 26 of Matthew chapter 24 tell us so graphically. The Lord in these verses also gives clear guidance as to the dangers they face from those who would deceive them. Verse 22 is also very interesting as it gives the indication that the judgement that is about to fall will be swift for the sake of God's earthly people, that is, the "elect."

Then from verses 27 to 31, we are given some details as to what the actual Second Coming of Christ, as Son of Man, will be like. It is worth considering for a moment how different this is to the First Coming of Christ as Son of Man, when He took flesh and entered this world as a helpless baby in an animal's stable because there was no room for Him in the inn. Apart from just a few shepherds in the field and wise men from the East, no one knew what had happened that night in Bethlehem. Christ's Second Coming will be seen by all nations of the earth, which the end of Revelation chapter 19 and into chapter 20 tells us about the awful happenings on earth which will accompany this event, that is, the Battle of Armageddon, see Revelation 16 verses 12-16. I do not think we should be too pedantic about the exact timings and order of these things, but it is important to get the general overall understanding of these events. Verse 31 then concludes with the wonderful truth that God's elect will be gathered together, rescued from their enemies who have been about to destroy them, and spared from the wrath of God that is about to fall on the nations. Again, we must remember that this is the elect, the Jewish remnant, and we, as believers in Christ and part of His Church, will already have been raptured to heaven some seven years prior to this, as we have already thought about from First Thessalonians chapter 4. Also in verse 31, we are told that the elect will be gathered by the great sound of a trumpet by the angel. If we can see the fulfilment of the Passover in the death of Christ, and the fulfilment of the Feast of Pentecost in the gift of the Holy Spirit and formation of the Church, then perhaps we can see here the fulfilment of the Feast of Trumpets, as detailed in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 23 to 25.

Then from verse 32 to the end of Matthew chapter 24, the Lord gives them three further illustrations or parables to challenge them as to their own readiness for these events. Firstly He talks about the fig tree; then He mentions what it was like in the days Noah before judgement came upon the world; and then finally about two servants, who have very different behaviour and attitudes as they waited for their master to return. So if these were to challenge the disciples there is no doubt there are things for us to learn today even though they primarily have a prophetic message.

He firstly draws their attention to the fig tree. In Israel, they very well know that summer is very near when the fig tree starts changing. This “generation” which the Lord refers to in verse 34 is obviously not those of that particular generation of people but rather the unbelieving Jews. Moses referred to them in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 5 and 20, as a perverse and crooked generation. Just as the fig tree starts to come back to life shows that summer is at hand, so when the unbelieving Jewish nation comes back to life, these things of which the Lord has spoken will be at hand. It is important to remember, however, that this is the Jewish nation as a whole, not individual Jews who come to recognise Him as the Messiah and trust Him as their Lord and Saviour in this the Day of Grace.

Then in verses 36 to 44, the Lord reminds them about what happened in the days of Noah. They were just getting on with doing whatever they thought was right in their own eyes and gave no thought to Noah, the man of God, who was warning of judgement to come and preparing an ark for people to be saved from that judgement. Then the Flood came and took away everyone apart from Noah and his family; and so when the Son of Man comes, He will take away in swift judgement all His enemies and leave the believing remnant of Jews on earth for blessing. Again, as we have already seen, quite different from the Rapture when Christ shall call away His Church from the earth for blessing and those who are left on earth will be left for judgement.

The remaining verses from 45 to the end of Matthew chapter 24 can have various applications but one thing cannot be applied here, they cannot refer to a genuine believer who falls and fails in their faith. What we have here is someone who specifically and intentionally takes advantage of the position that their master has entrusted to them because they have decided that the master’s return is not imminent. Perhaps it could refer to the unbeliever who accepts and enjoys the natural blessings of life but disregards the Giver of all these things, that is, God. It could equally apply to the leaders of faith, whether Jew or professing Christendom, who enjoy the position and all that goes with that, and use that power to subjugate those who have been put under their care with no thought that the Master will soon return, and they will be required to give account. Either way, they will be classed with the hypocrite and sent to that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, phrases the Lord Jesus often used to describe hell.

I fully appreciate that many of these things are difficult to fully understand, but I trust this talk has been of some help and may create interest to study more on these prophetic subjects. May God bless His word to our hearts.

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