

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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36. Eschatology

I. Disciple's Two Questions

Jesus has been teaching his disciples that he is going to be going away. Then he promises that after some time, he will return, but he will return in judgment. Jesus is now at the end of the last week of his life and in Matthew 24:1 he makes another promise, "Jesus left the temple and was going away when the disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. (They were awed by their beauty.) But he answered them, '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.'" This is a horrific prophecy to the disciples because in their theology this was the house of God. To attack and overthrow God's house was to attack and overthrow God. So later on, they follow up with two questions in verse 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 the close of the age?'" It is important to note that they asked Jesus two questions. One, when is the temple going to be destroyed and two, what signs are going to warn us that you are about to return and that we will be at the end of age? Jews think of time in terms of two ages, two time periods. We live in this age and this age is going to end when the Messiah comes back and then, with his coming, we will be ushered into the new age, the eschatological age, the Messianic age. There are lots of terms that we use for that. The disciples cannot conceive of something as horrific as the destruction of the temple happening apart from Jesus' return and the end of the age. So probably in their minds as they ask these two questions, they were thinking that it was really one question. But the key to understanding Matthew 24 is to recognize that the disciples asked two questions and in reality there are two different answers, a different answer for each of the two questions. And so, as we work through Matthew 24, it is key to remember which question Jesus is answering now because he flips back and forth.

II. Jesus Answers Disciples Questions

A. Temple's Destruction

So Jesus starts with the first question, the question of when will the temple be destroyed? In verses 4-8 he says, there are going to be many false signs. False prophets will come, there will be wars, there will be famines and earthquakes. But none of these are telling you that the temple is about to be destroyed. In popular thought in the Christian church, we often get that thought exactly backwards. But wars and famine and earthquakes are but the beginning, they don't mean anything about the destruction of the temple.

In verses 9-14 Jesus gives them the first true sign that the temple is going to be destroyed and that is the sign of tribulation. You are going to be persecuted for your faith. It is going to be severe, even unto the point of death. That's the first sign that we're headed towards the destruction of the temple. But please look specifically at verses 12-14. "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many (and in this context that is many who claim to be Christians) will grow cold, but the one who endures to the end will be saved and this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations." Jesus is saying that in this time of tribulation, there will be what we call apostasy. There will be a rebellion against

God, people who appear to be believers, but who are leaving in droves. The love of many will grow cold, but the true disciples will persevere. They will hang in there until the end. They will continue to proclaim the gospel until all the world has heard it. The reason that verses 12-14 are so important is that eschatology, the study of last things, is primarily ethical. That's often missed in discussions. The primary purpose of these kinds of passages, eschatological discussions (2 Thessalonians 2, all of Revelation) is not so much to give us a detailed road map into the future but it is to tell us that it's going to get worse. We win, they lose, so live like you believe it. Be faithful. That's what Matthew 24 and 25 are really all about. Yes, there are indications and things going on but the thrust (and this is why I want to get to Chapter 25) is, how are you going to live during this time of tribulation because the temptation is for you to back off, to fall away. But those who are truly disciples of Jesus Christ will continue to be faithful to the very end, no matter what, proclaiming the gospel to the whole world because they know at the end we win, they lose. But the first true sign of the coming destruction of the temple is tribulation.

B. Abomination of Desolation

In verse 15 Jesus gives them the second and final sign. It has to do with something called the abomination of desolation. In verses 15 and 16 we read, "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place (the temple) let the reader understand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." The second and final sign that the temple is just about ready to be destroyed is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy that the abomination of desolation is going to come. Elsewhere this abominating desolation is called the anti-Christ. Perhaps the best explanation of the anti-Christ is in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. In 2:3, "Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion (the apostasy) comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction (there is your anti-Christ, there is your abominating desolation) who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God." When the Jewish Christians see the temple being desecrated and a human being claiming to be God going into the temple, demanding worship, and destroying what the Jews correctly understand as worship, that is when they are to turn tail and run as fast as they can and get out of Judea. Jesus has now answered the first of the two questions. When is this going to happen? Tribulation is going to increase, the temple is going to be desecrated by the anti-Christ, get out of town. And, if you know your history, you will know this is exactly what happened. 50 years later, in AD 70, the Romans came in, destroyed the temple, Nero thought he was God and an interesting theological fact is that when they destroyed the temple, they destroyed not just the temple itself but all the surrounding buildings and they pulled every single stone off the temple mount. If you go there today, all that is left is the top of the mountain and the supporting walls of the mount. Everything was gone. Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled.

C. Review of the Signs

Now, everything has been pretty straightforward up to that point, but at verse 21 it starts to get a little sticky. "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be. And if those days (these times of persecution) had not been cut short, no human being would be saved.

But for the sake of the elect, (the true disciples) those days will be cut short." Here is why this gets a little sticky. There certainly was a tremendous increase in tribulation leading up to the destruction of the temple. The church is being persecuted, people are being killed. But when the Romans attacked Jerusalem, the Jewish historian Josephus tells us (and he has a little trouble with numbers but is generally right) one million Jews were killed. He tells grotesque stories of cannibalism, parents eating their children and things like that. It was the time of horrific tribulation. And yet, the language in verses 21 and 22 seem to move beyond AD 70 and the destruction of the temple. You notice the phrase "no human being". It didn't say no Jew. It says, no human being could be saved if God did not cut this time of suffering and persecution and tribulation short. Put on your thinking caps. Most people, because of the language in verses 21 and 22 believe that the tribulation of AD 70 was a pre-cursor (and this is typical of prophecy with double fulfillments) to an even greater tribulation that is going to happen right before Jesus comes back. It is when we experience that tribulation that these words will in fact have their fullest meaning.

Verses 23-28 add one final note. There is going to continue to be false prophets during this tribulation. In other words, Jesus doesn't want his disciples to get tricked. When Jesus returns, everyone is going to know it. Look at verse 27, "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." It is very common during times of tribulation to have false Christs, false Messiahs saying, "I am your savior, I am your resurrection, follow me." Jesus says, "Don't believe them because when I come back, there's not going to be any question about it at all. Everyone is going to know it." In other words, it is impossible to have a secret return of Christ. By the way, this is one of the fundamental doctrines behind Seventh Day Adventism and Jehovah's Witness.

Jesus is finished answering and dealing with that first question. Starting in verse 29, he shifts to the second question. What are going to be the signs leading up to his return? What he says is that this period of tribulation is going to continue but some day it will end instantly and without warning. Please hear that. That is the message from this part in chapter 24, on through chapter 25. The tribulation will end instantly, without warning. There are going to be cosmic signs. The sun will be dark and the moon will not give its light. Perhaps these are metaphors, like when we talk about something being "earth shattering" or perhaps they are literal, I don't know. But the point is verses 30 and 31, "Then will appear in heaven the sign (in other words, you want a sign? Here's the sign! The sign is the Son of Man. There will be no sign other than my coming.) of the Son of Man and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn (because there is no time to repent, no warning) 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 his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." Can you imagine what that's going to be like? Can you imagine if this happens during our lifetime, to have been living in times of persecution? Children turning in parents, parents turning in children, people thinking they were doing God a favor by killing you, yet you stand in there, you persevere, you stay faithful, you continue to preach the good news of the gospel because you know at the end of times you win and they lose. Then, all of a sudden, "BAM!" At the trumpet sound, all of a sudden, everything is there and a ton of angels come and say to each of us, "You are one of the elect, the faithful, come on! It's time to come home." Imagine what that's going to be like in the midst of the persecution!

What has to happen before Jesus comes back again? We are going to get into something a little controversial but that's OK. The one thing we can agree on is tribulation. That seems to be the underlying current through this whole time. Throughout the life of the church, there will be persecution. There will be tribulation leading up to the cosmic signs and the sign of the coming of the Son of Man. But you know what? The worldwide church has lived in constant tribulation, tribulation that is often horrific in many places. In America we just don't feel it – yet. But if you would go to the Sudan or Indonesia and ask these people, "Are you living in tribulation?" They would say, "Of course we are, in fact, we can't even imagine it getting worse." The Muslims are marching through portions of Indonesia and killing entire villages. They are wiping them out. If you talk to one of those Indonesian Christians, they would say, "If God does not cut short the time, how will any human being survive this persecution, this suffering?"

I think that everything that must occur before Jesus returns has already occurred or is occurring right now. I don't know how to read this passage any differently. You need to know, if you are struggling with this, I did too. I actually had to change my views a bit on eschatology this week because my view of eschatology did not allow me to preach the second half of Matthew 24 and 25 because the thrust is, Jesus is coming again. You can't sit around and wait for the signs and then get ready, you've got to be ready now. You've got to be ready now. The repeat of the Great Tribulation of AD 70 may already be under way. Just ask the Indonesian Christians. Perhaps we are in the midst of the final apostasy. I mean, look at the state of the American church! Look at the garbage that is being preached from so many of the pulpits, a refusal to preach the full gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel without sin, a gospel without true grace, a gospel without discipleship. The pews and the chairs are full of people who have never heard the gospel and are therefore on their way to hell. I believe the American church is smack dab in the middle of a huge apostasy that, unless God comes back again or sends a revival, it is only going to get worse. Maybe the anti-Christ, the man of lawlessness, already has been revealed. By the time of 1 John, he says there are many anti-Christ. But Jesus' point, starting here in Matthew 24, going all the way through the end of 25, is that there are no more specific signs. There are no more specific warnings. The disciples' second question was the wrong question. You shouldn't be looking for the signs of Jesus' return and he is going to tell us in a few verses what the right question should have been.

Jesus then starts to speak specifically about the signs that are going to precede these two events. In verse 32 he flips back to the first question about when will the temple be destroyed. In reference to the temple destruction, he says, watch for the signs. "From the fig tree, learn this lesson. As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near." In other words, you can look at the signs of nature and understand things. So also, when you see all of these things, you know that Jesus is near at the very gates. "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away." The question of course in this passage is, what do "these things" refer to? "These things" cannot refer to Christ's return, to verses 29-31. Follow the logic. Back in verse 3, the disciples say, "Tell us when these things will be." The question is about the destruction of the temple. In verse 33, "So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near at the very gates." But he is not here, he is only near. "These things" cannot refer to the coming of Christ because "these things" talk about him being near, not being present. That's why Jesus continues in verse 34, these things (the things

leading up to the destruction of the temple, the tribulation and the abomination and the temple's destruction) will all occur within one generation of the time that he is speaking. So he's gone back again to emphasize that there are signs that are leading up to the destruction of the temple. But then he goes to the second question. And the point is going to be, there are no more specific signs preceding his return. That's the basic thrust from here to the end of chapter 25. The right question that the disciples should have asked is, how can we be ready? Not, what are the signs of your coming? Verse 36, "But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only." He can't be speaking of the destruction of the temple because there are signs. God and Jesus do know. There are signs leading up to when the temple is going to be destroyed. But in verse 36, he has switched back to Jesus' return. He says, concerning that day, the day in which Jesus who is near actually walks through the gates, no one but the Father knows. Isn't that interesting? God the Father has kept for himself the knowledge and the prerogative to end time. God the Son does not know it. God the Spirit does not know it. God the Father will make that decision. Sometimes I can imagine Jesus saying, "When do I get to go back?" "When I decide." Some people think that day and hour means a specific time. We can know the general season but we don't know specifically when it's going to happen. It's a possible interpretation but it's not necessary. The phrase day and hour can be used for very large spans of time, but it really is irrelevant because they all arrive at the same position. If you and I are not prepared and watching, then we will be caught unawares and it will surprise us.

Jesus then follows with a series of three passages and the point is, don't become preoccupied with looking for signs. Don't wait for signs and then get ready, but rather, get ready. So Jesus starts and says, you know, when I come back again, I'm going to catch some people unaware, just like the flood caught some people who were involved in everyday life unaware, so also will be my return. Agriculture would be going on. They will be grinding the meal, walking along the road, life will be continuing as normal, but it is going to come and it's going to catch people unaware if you are not prepared for it. Look specifically at verse 42, "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Vs. 44, "Therefore, you also must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." See, there can't be specific signs, because then we would expect it. In fact, as Jesus continues, I may come sooner than you think. The next parable is the master who left his servant in charge of his house and the wise servant was faithful. When the master returned, he rewarded him for it. He will set him over many possession, verse 47. But the unwise servant is the servant who thinks that his master is not going to come back for a long time. The master comes back sooner than he expects, the servant has been getting drunk and beating the other servants, and he is punished for it. In other words, Jesus may come back sooner than you think. Or, Matthew 25, Jesus may come back later than you expect. We have here the parable of the 10 virgins, a terrible translation, because the issue is not their lack of sexual activity – these young ladies are bridesmaids in a wedding. Jewish custom is that they got married in the bride's house. That was the legal ceremony. When it was done, there was the procession out of it and that was when everyone would join in the procession and they would move to the groom's house. That's where they would have the wedding feast. So Jesus says, there were ten bridesmaids, five of them foolish, five of them smart. The foolish ones did not have extra oil. They waited and waited for the procession. It was later than they were expecting. When it finally came, they had run out of oil, so they ran out to get more oil and by the time they came

back, the wedding party had gone into the groom's house and then the door was shut. So the wise bridesmaids were rewarded by being a part of the feast. The unwise bridesmaids were punished because when they knocked on the door he said in verse 12, "I don't know you." Jesus is going to come. He is going to catch people unawares. It may be sooner than you think. It may be later than you think. The question is not what signs do we have to watch for? The question is, how must I be prepared?

III. Preparing for His Coming

How are you and I, given the fact that there is not going to be a specific warning, to get ready? This is where I had to change because I realized that in the back of my head I was thinking, Jesus can't come back because of these reasons so, maybe when I see the signs, I'll start to get ready. But you cannot read the second half of chapter 24 and 25 and have that attitude, because he is going to come at an hour when we do not expect if we are not watching and prepared for it. So how do you and I get ready? How do you and I live in a way that is prepared? We are at the heart of eschatology at this point. This is what Jesus wants to get across. So he tells us two stories. The first is in chapter 25:14-30, in the parable of the talents. Again, please do not read this parable in isolation. The parable is there to help us know what it means to be prepared, to get ready for Jesus' return. A talent is 60 denarii. In other words, it is about two months' wages. So, as Jesus tells the parable, the master has three servants. To one he gives five talents, ten months wages. To another he gives two talents and to another he gives one talent. The first two go out and they invest their money and the servant with five talents earns another five. The servant with two talents earns another two and the servant with one talent is scared of his master and he buries it in the ground. The master comes back and both the servant with five talents and the servant with two talents receive exactly the same reward, word for word, exactly the same. Verse 21, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." Is there anything sweeter or that you want to hear more than those words? Well done, enter into the joy of your master. Is there anything that this world has to compare? The answer is no. And yet, when the master confronts the third servant, he gets mad at him. He says, you at least should have invested the talent. He calls him, "You wicked and slothful servant. Cast the wicked servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." How do we prepare for the Lord's return? We prepare for Jesus' return by being good stewards of what he has given us. That is the message of the parable of the talents. That is how you and I are going to get ready to wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus, to understand that we are stewards. This stuff that we have is not ours. All of the money that I possess and all of the material possessions that are in my name, all that I have, including my abilities and my opportunities, none of these are mine. None of them are yours. None of us are independently wealthy. Every one of us has been entrusted with one or two or five talents. We prepare for his return by being good stewards and using God's wealth and God's resources to advance God's purposes. The principle and the interest are his. But then Jesus goes on to the discourse. It is not a parable but a discourse on the final judgment. He tells us the second way in which we get ready, verses 31-46. He pictures the throne room scene. Jesus is on the judgment seat. The sheep are to the right, the goats are to the left. Starting at verse 34 Jesus says to the sheep, "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For (this is why I'm saying this to

you) I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'" Wow, you mean at the judgment seat, he's not going to ask if I made a profession of faith? No. He is going to look at my life and he is going to say, when I made you into a new creature by my grace and mercy appropriated by your faith and made you into a new being and gave you a second birth, did you live out your new life as a steward? Did you use my wealth and my time for my purposes? Did you deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me? Or, as he turns to the goats on the left, he says just the opposite. "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Why? "'Because I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' And they will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you?' Then Jesus will answer them saying, 'Truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. Go to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life.'"

Are you ready for Jesus to come back? He is at the gates. Everything that has to have happened before he returns has happened or is happening. I guess you could ask the question another way, what do you want to hear when you stand before the throne? Do you want to hear, "You wicked and slothful servant, cast this wicked and slothful servant into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth"? Is that what you want to hear? Fine! Then live for the present. Don't look for your Master's return. Refuse to use God's wealth for God's purposes. Go ahead and store up treasures on earth. Refuse to be a steward of God's time. Refuse to visit your disenfranchised brothers and sisters. Or do you want to hear verse 21, "Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master." Do you want to hear verse 34, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"? Then let's get ready! Let's understand that before we became disciples of Jesus Christ through faith, and faith alone, we were dead in our trespasses and sin. There was nothing that we could do to merit our salvation. Yet, in our conversion, God changed me and made me into a new creation. He is going to hold me accountable for the change in my life empowered by God's Spirit.

There, did I cover everyone's buttons? Be ready for Jesus' return. He may come sooner than you expect, he may come later than you expect, but he's going to come. When he comes, he will say, have you used all that I gave you for my purposes? The principle and the interest is mine. Did you love your brothers and sisters, especially those in need? Did you feed the hungry, welcome the strangers, clothe the naked, visit the disenfranchised? Because as you do it them, you do it to me. If you hear nothing else this morning, then hear this, Jesus is coming again. It may be sooner than you think. It may be later than you think. But he is coming and when he comes, we win. When he comes, they lose. And the only thing that is acceptable to God is if you and I live like we believe it. And that means that we are going to prepare, we are going to be good stewards of his wealth and his time.