

Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part IX)

The Olivet Discourse

24:1-2, The Destruction of the Temple

Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple: Jesus' movement here is worded in an emphatic way; "went out and departed" is intentionally repetitive; Jesus was leaving the temple for the last time in His earthly ministry, and also was done with His teaching to and regarding the Jewish religious leaders.

This temple is the one built after the destruction of Solomon's temple. This one was built by Zerubbabel and Ezra (Ezra 6). Herod the Great (who ruled when Jesus was born) expanded and improved it. In fact, that expansion project took over 80 years, starting in 19 B.C. and not being completed until A.D. 63, over 50 years after Herod's death (*that* Herod, anyway!) 17th century commentator John Trapp, Cited by 21st century commentator David Guzik:

"Josephus the Jew (Antiquities 15.14) tells us that for eight whole years together he kept 10,000 men a-work about it; and that for magnificence and stateliness, it exceeded Solomon's temple."

All in all, this temple was the center of Jewish life for nearly a thousand years!

And it was an impressive structure. After the Herodian expansion, the temple was nearly 500 yards long by 400 yards wide. It was also beautiful. Josephus has a more detailed description telling us that the temple was covered with gold plates, and when the sun shone on them it was blinding to look at. Where there was no gold, there were blocks of marble of such a pure white that from a distance strangers thought there was snow on the temple.

There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down: Less than 40 years after Jesus said this, there was a Jewish revolt against the Roman occupation of Palestine, and they enjoyed many early successes, ultimately Roman armies utterly crushed the rebellion. By A.D. 70 Jerusalem was leveled, including the temple. Just as Jesus said.

Histories record that at the fall of Jerusalem, the last surviving Jews of the city fled to the temple, because it was the strongest and most secure building in the city. Roman soldiers surrounded it, and allegedly one drunken soldier started a fire that soon engulfed the whole building. Ornate gold detail work in the roof melted down in the cracks between the stone walls of the temple, and to retrieve the gold, the Roman commander ordered that the temple be dismantled stone by stone. The destruction was so complete that today it's difficult to identify exactly where the foundation of the temple was.

24:3-14, Signs of the End of the Age

As He sat on the Mount of Olives: So they had moved away from the temple, yet were overlooking it, and it is here that the disciples ask Jesus questions about His disturbing prediction concerning the temple's future destruction.

Remember, they had just listened to Jesus pronounce all those "woes" to and about the Chief Priests and the corruption of other religious leaders, in which He talked about the dangers of their false teaching. But was that connected to these unsettling words about the temple? It makes perfectly good sense, then, that they had questions.

When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming...? Jesus said the temple would be completely destroyed. It was logical that the disciples wanted to know when it would happen, and what events they should be on the lookout for as it drew near.

The disciples might've thought they were asking one question, but really, there are at least two here, and Jesus spends most of the rest of the chapter answering the second question!

See that no one leads you astray: From the outset, Jesus warns the disciples that many could be deceived even as they anticipated His return. We've seen times in the history of the church when rash predictions have been made --

and then relied upon as being Biblical truth -- resulting in great disappointment, disillusionment, and even falling way from the faith.

Examples abound, unfortunately, especially in American Christianity.

For example, in the early 1840s William Miller made numerous prophetic interpretations support by sometimes-impenetrable calculations, and advertised in numerous tracts and publications, which lead hundreds of thousands of believers in the United States to be convinced that Jesus would return in 1844. When He did not, there was tremendous disappointment, with some leaving the church altogether, and some cultic groups spawned from the prophetic fervor. Miller did not let this faze him; he continued to calculate new predictions, all of which, of course, were incorrect. Descendants of such movements include today's Seventh Day Adventist church.

Charles Taze Rusell, the founder of what would become known as the Watchtower Society, or Jehovah's Witnesses, predicted that Jesus would return in April 1878. When this did not happen, he re-branded the event as Jesus' "Spiritual Return". The Society then again incorrectly predicted the end to occur in 1914.

For this must take place, but the end is not yet.... All these are but the beginning of the birth pains: The kind of things Jesus mentions in this section are not the things that mark specific signs of the end. Things like false messiahs, wars, famines, pandemics (pestilence), earthquakes, etc. have certainly marked man's history since the time of Jesus' Ascension – but were not specific signs of the end. In effect Jesus is telling His disciples – and us! -- "Catastrophes will happen, but these do not signal the end."

But this is **not** a call to complacency. Though none of those events are the specific sign of the end, but collectively they **are** a sign. When Jesus described these calamities as being "labor pains", He's telling us they will happen over an extended period, but also a definite period. These things will not go on forever, but they will continue until the end.

They will deliver you to tribulation and kill you: In the period after Jesus ascends to heaven and before He comes again, His disciples should expect to be persecuted. We know that this was the very real experience for all of Jesus' apostles and many of His disciples.

Will betray one another: The pressure of persecution would reveal traitors within the Church, just as it reveals enemies from outside of it.

Lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold: In the period after Jesus ascends to heaven and before He comes again, His disciples should expect to see society become worse and worse. But this also is not the specific sign of His return. The same is true today.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come: So here Jesus tells us not about a sign, but a truth and a promise that will be realized before the end comes; the Gospel will reach all nations. Hasn't that happened yet? Aren't we at least very close to this? It's a safe assumption that this is closer to fruition every day. Beyond that, only God knows.

Even so, we the Church should take this seriously and do what we can to promote it as we seek to live out the Great Commission. The good news is, God has ***promised*** that it will happen:

*Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, **with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.** And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." (Revelation 14:6-7)*

24:15-28, The Abomination of Desolation

When you see the "abomination of desolation": Essentially, the abomination of desolation speaks of the ultimate desecration of a Jewish temple, the establishment of an idolatrous image in the holy place itself, which will inevitably result in the judgment of God. It is an abomination borne of desolation, and that brings desolation.

Standing in the holy place: This means that the abomination of desolation takes place in the Jewish temple itself, or in any way claims to speak as God, or worse, as a replacement of God.

As spoken of by Daniel the prophet: The mention of the abomination of desolation is taken from the book of Daniel:

*They shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation.
(Daniel 11:31)*

This describes a complete desecration of the temple, prefigured by Antiochus Epiphanies in the period between the Old and New Testaments. Antiochus proclaimed himself as “Everlasting God” and the only object of worship, and banned all temple sacrifices and temple worship of the Jewish God. So when Jesus points back to this, He is telling us that this will happen again; that a man will declare himself to be God.

History record this happening multiple times in multiple places, including some of the more corrupt Roman emperors.

St. Paul elaborates on the future fulfillment of this in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4:
3:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 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.

Whoever reads, let him understand: It’s almost as if Jesus is saying, "Don’t miss this. If you don’t understand this when you read Daniel, you won’t understand many other things that have yet to occur." And this is exactly the error of many who, with good intentions, misunderstand the plain meaning of the abomination of desolation (e.g. the “Left Behind” series and similar AntiChrist-driven fiction).

For those in Jesus’ day, much of what follows can be taken as applying to the years to come before things started getting bad in the mid-to-late 60’s as the Romans started harshly putting down rebellions.

To “get outa Dodge” is perfectly fine when things go bad. If you must leave to protect yourself and your family, go!

And apparently people listened. D. A. Carson says, "*There is reasonably good tradition that Christians abandoned the city, perhaps in A.D. 68, about halfway through the siege.*"

Commentator Clarke:

"Eusebius and Epiphanius say, that at this juncture, after Cestius Gallus had raised the siege, and Vespasian was approaching with his army, all who believed in Christ left Jerusalem and fled to Pella, and other places beyond the river Jordan; and so they all marvellously escaped the general shipwreck of their country: not one of them perished."

Apparently, that was not what the Jewish people did. Barclay:

"Jesus' advice was that when that day came men ought to flee to the mountains. They did not; they crammed themselves into the city and into the walls of Jerusalem from all over the country, and that very folly multiplied the grim horror of the famine of the siege a hundredfold."

For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together: This is a figure of speech with the idea, "when the time for judgment is 'ripe', it will happen."

24:29-35, The Return of Jesus Christ

The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light: Several prophetic passages describe the cosmic disturbances that will precede and surround the glorious return of Jesus (Joel 2:10, Revelation 6:12-14, Isaiah 34:4).

The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven: It is difficult to say exactly what this sign is. It's probably best to just accept that it will be visible return of Jesus to Earth from heaven, and nobody will miss it!

Learn this parable from the fig tree: The fig tree has a regular pattern to it. The leaves appear, and then summer follows. When you see the leaves, you know summer is near. It was a common fruit tree in Israel, and is mentioned many times in Bible.

Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place: This statement of Jesus is one of the central reasons many have looked for all or most of the events of this chapter to be fulfilled in A.D. 70, approximately 40 years after Jesus spoke these words. And while most of them did occur in that timeframe, they have continued to occur over the centuries since.

24:36-44, No Man Knows That Day and Hour

Of that day and hour no one knows: Here, Jesus refers back to the original question of Matthew 24:3 (what will be the sign of Your coming?). His answer is somewhat unexpected, saying of that day and hour no one knows.

To give this idea the strongest emphasis, Jesus claimed that this knowledge was reserved for His Father only. If Jesus Himself – at least during His earthly ministry – did not know this day and hour, it emphasizes the foolishness of any later person making certain predictions regarding the prophetic timetable.

As the days of Noah were: Jesus explained what He meant by the days of Noah. It means life centered around the normal things: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. In other words, life will be business as usual; corrupt, reprobate, and perhaps even evil, but *usual*.

Those alive in the days of Noah were warned, and judgment eventually came. To those who had ignored the warnings, it came suddenly and unexpectedly.

Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left: Jesus here points not to cartoonish disappearances; this points to the salvation of the one “taken” than the destruction of the one “left”.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 tells us we will meet Him in the air.

Zechariah 14:5 says He will come with His saints.

It’s all instantaneous!

24:45-47, The Parable of the Two Servants

Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing: Jesus told us that we must carry on with diligence while the Lord is gone. We must be that faithful and wise servant who takes care of his master’s business while the master is away.

Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods: Jesus also promised that we will be rewarded for our diligence. The servants serve the master, but the master knows how to take care of and reward the servants. There’s some mystery to this, I think. But we can trust that it is true!

If that evil servant says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming":

Jesus warns us against having an attitude that says, "my master is delaying his coming." We should instead live in *anticipation* of Jesus' return, and be about our business for Him while we anticipate His return.

Cut him in two: Yikes!!! F. F. Bruce:

"The probable meaning is: will cut him in two (so to speak) with a whip = thrash him, the base slave, unmercifully. It is a strong word, selected to sympathy with the master's rage."