

The End of the World As We Know It

Matthew 24

I'm going to start today with the premise we all think the world is in a mess. I'm not going to try and prove that to you, it's just the premise. We all might think there are very different reasons *why* the world is in a mess. But, strangely, what unites just about everyone across the broad spectrum of left and right, conservative and progressive, religious and secular, is that the world *is* in a mess.

The fact of COVID and the various attempts to deal with it. The shock of Russian aggression against Ukraine. A looming climate catastrophe. Large-scale natural disasters – fires, floods, earthquakes, cyclones. Political unrest and scandal in the church. A crisis of mental health, particularly amongst young people. The breakdown of families and communities, shortage of housing, rising interest rates, the growing cost of living. The headlines testify to a world in turmoil. It seems to many as if the world is coming apart at the seams. *It's the end of the world as we know it*, and no one feels particularly fine about it.

And yet the call to followers of Jesus remains exactly the same. To gather in worship, and to go and proclaim the gospel. To be people of steadfast faith, and radical hope, and Christ-like love. So how do we find our bearings in a world that is breaking apart? How can we not only cope in this mess of a world, but keep going in the service of Jesus and his kingdom?

As usual, we need to listen to Jesus. And in particular to the, let's be honest, downright confusing teaching of Matthew 24. Throughout Matthew's gospel Jesus has taught from the mountain as the new Moses, giving the commands of his Kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. In his parables he has taught as the new Solomon, the true and better King dispensing the true and better wisdom of the kingdom. Now Jesus speaks as a new prophet – like Jeremiah he has delivered judgement on the temple and its leaders; in this chapter he is like Ezekiel, depicting scenes of strange apocalyptic imagery. But we are all the better for its strangeness. Jesus is not giving us empty platitudes, but a cosmic picture within which to understand the chaos of our everyday lives.

Given the complex nature of this chapter, we're going to spend a bit more time trying to clear some of the interpretive ground. But I think that little bit of hard work and close attention will open up the way for real challenge and encouragement. For the longer I have camped out in this passage through this week, the more I am convinced that *this* teaching of Jesus is exactly what we need to live for Jesus in a world that's falling apart.

THE PATTERN OF JERUSALEM

So, deep breath, let's dive in. And my basic contention is that Jesus is painting a picture that points forward primarily to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Here's the basic rule of Bible reading which I am applying: start with what is clear, and then let's go from there.

- Points of Clarity

And I think there are three points of clarity which emerge from all the confusion of Matthew 24.

Firstly, there is the context. At the end of Matthew 23, Jesus lamented over the city of Jerusalem. Just cast your eyes back a few verses. Matthew 23:37:

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. **Look, your house is left to you desolate.***

Jesus has come and offered peace to the house of the temple. But it has not been received, and so he shakes the dust off his feet against that house and heads to the mount of Olives, never to set foot in the temple again.

Jesus has entered the temple to inspect it for defilements, and has found that the house is full of the spreading mould of idolatry and oppression. As the law requires, He has visited the house several times to examine the infection and to determine if the house must be condemned. Finally, He pronounces the house unclean, and as the law requires, He declares that the house must be torn down.

This is the context for Matthew 24 – Jesus' judgement against Jerusalem and the promise of the temple's desolation.

And the temple remains the focus at the beginning of Matthew 24, which is our second point of clarity. For the disciples point back down to the temple and call Jesus' attention to its many buildings. You get the sense that there is a question behind their pointing. What is going to happen to all this? Surely there is hope and a future for this grand and impressive structure at the centre of Israel?

Jesus' response is devastating. Verse 2:

"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."

This kicks off the whole conversation. The disciples' questions are prompted by this promise: *when* and *how* will the destruction of the temple come to pass?

Then thirdly, at the climax of Jesus' teaching, after he has laid out the signs of his coming at the end of the age, Jesus makes one more emphatic statement:

Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The most straightforward way to understand this statement is that Jesus is talking about dramatic events that will take place *within the lifetime of his first disciples*. What he is talking about, they will see with their own eyes, and they will know that the words of Jesus are sure and true.

In fact, this sense of an immanent catastrophe has been present from the beginning of Matthew's gospel. John said to the Pharisees that "the ax is already at the root of the trees." Jesus said that his kingdom was "at hand" – very near, right around the corner. Jesus speaks again and again about *this* generation. Jesus' parables picture some impending disaster. Jesus says that a storm is coming, and those who fail to listen to the words of Jesus and turn to him in repentance and faith, their house will fall with a sudden crash.

Jesus is clearly pointing to something happening soon, shortly, just over the horizon.

- **Old Testament Prophecy**

These points of clarity open up even further when we see the way that Jesus draws upon Old Testament prophecy. Now there is almost no end to how deep we could go down THIS rabbit hole. For Jesus is alluding to prophetic imagery from Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Zechariah – there's a *lot* going on here.

But in particular, Jesus refers to the prophet Daniel. Listen again from verse 15:

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.

Just quietly, "let the reader understand" is one of the most hilariously ironic interjections in Scripture. Thanks Matthew, that cryptic comment *really* helps a lot. But when we open up to Daniel chapter 9 it does help at least a little.

For in the exile, as God's people lived in Babylon, God gave Daniel a vision. Daniel was hoping for a return to the land, and rescue from Babylon. But God wanted to expand Daniel's horizons to see God's purposes on a grander historical scale.

God told Daniel about an anointed one who would be put to death and have nothing. About a gentile ruler who would come to destroy the city and the sanctuary. God spoke of a new covenant and the end of sacrifice and offering. And he decreed a definitive ending and desolation is poured out on the temple.

And what does Jesus say in the gospels? He says that **he** will suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders. **He** is the anointed one put to death with nothing. But in his death he makes a new covenant in his blood. **He** puts an end to offering and sacrifice as **he** gives himself as the one sacrifice and offering for the sins of the whole world.

And the rejection of Jesus, and the persecution of his disciples, **that** is the abomination that causes desolation. As Jesus said in the previous chapter:

I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, ... Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

Jesus is saying that the fulfilment of all Old Testament expectation is happening **in him**. The Old Covenant age is coming to a definitive end and the New Covenant age of the kingdom is beginning.

- **Prophetic Imagery**

Now, at this stage you could be thinking: “yep, sure, fine, but doesn’t this all just sound a little bit BIGGER than anything that could have happened in history?”

What about the sun darkening, the moon going out, the stars falling from the sky, the heavenly bodies being shaken. This is cosmic stuff! Surely it must be talking about the end of the space-time universe – the end of all things at Jesus’ second coming on the earth.

Well, the last thing we need to understand that Jesus is borrowing standard prophetic imagery when he talks in this way. Standard prophetic language that talks about the collapse of a *world order* by speaking about the collapse of the physical universe.

This goes right back to Genesis 1 where the sun, moon and stars are described not only as lights, but as rulers in the sky – they *govern* the night and the day. And so the prophets speak of kings on earth, as the sun, moon and stars in the sky. We’re actually far more familiar with this than we realise: just think of how many national flags are covered in stars, or are emblazoned with a moon or a sun. Even today, these are metaphors of power and rule.

And so when stars fall, that means rulers are falling. When the moon turns to blood, that means a kingdom is being eclipsed. The sun, moon and stars are also clocks – they keep the time and the seasons. When they stop operating, that means that somebody’s clock has stopped – their time is up.

Isaiah prophesied the end of Babylon in these terms. Ezekiel used this language in lament over Egypt. And now Jesus picks up this language to describe the impending judgement against Jerusalem.

For the religious leaders of Israel had become *like Babylon*. They had rejected Jesus, the Son of the Living God and gone after abominable idols. They had become *like Egypt*, little Pharaoh's enslaving the people and oppressing the saints. And so Jesus promises the end of that world. The old system centred on the temple will be eclipsed by the new kingdom centred around Jesus. And as Jesus comes in judgement, it will be clear that the old has passed away, and the new has come.

So let's bring this down to earth:

Imagine that you are a Christian in the first century, say around 60AD. You've heard the gospel and put your faith in Jesus. At this stage there are probably less than 10,000 Christians in the whole world. You belong to a tiny minority, living in the shadow of the Roman empire.

And life is hard. If you were a Gentile Christian all your family and friends would call you a fool. To reject the traditional God's to worship a man who was crucified? How ridiculous.

And if you were a Jewish Christian it would be even worse. You would be labelled a blasphemer. To go after this man Jesus was not just foolish but dangerous.

You are on the margins of society. You are harassed and persecuted. You know Christian leaders who have been beaten and imprisoned. Some have been killed. You know people in your church who were forced to flee their home because of their faith.

And with all of that pressure the church is being pulled in every direction. There are false teachers who seem to be teaching something very different to the gospel you heard and believed. They have lots of elaborate theories that have very little to do with Jesus.

Some teachers water down the message to make it more acceptable to greek and jewish ears. Many have turned away from the high demands of discipleship, as their first love has cooled to a complacent indifference. And you can't help but ask: Jesus promised a glorious kingdom – and is this it? Does Jesus not see all the suffering and chaos? Or does Jesus not care? Or is Jesus even there?

But then you remember *these* words of Jesus. That all the chaos is not the end. That all the suffering is not the end. That all the turmoil is not the end. Jesus said "all these are the beginnings of birth pains." These are not signs of the end, but of something new being birthed into the world. And so you keep going. You don't get sucked in by the false teachers. You don't give in to the pressure to conform. You don't slide into idle indifference.

You keep proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. And you hear that the news of the gospel keeps spreading – this too was a sign! And you keep listening to the words of Jesus and you keep serving him and the people around you. You bear up under the pressure.

And then it all happens just as Jesus said. The might of Rome sweeps in, the temple is torn down, Jerusalem falls. And after years of hard but faithful service you know that none of it has escaped God's sight. That God cares about every drop of righteous blood that is spilled. That Jesus really is the new temple, the true place of meeting between God and humanity. That Jesus' sacrifice really is sufficient for your sins. That the new age of the kingdom has begun – for Jesus the King really does live and he really does reign on his heavenly throne.

What fuel for faithfully following Jesus that must have been! And the Kingdom of Jesus has been expanding to the four corners of the world ever since.

THE PATTERN OF JESUS

Now I have said that Jesus is talking about a specific time and place, a specific set of historical events. But this doesn't mean His prophecy is irrelevant to us now. Because this whole sequence happens again and again in history. And it will continue happening until Jesus comes and ends history once and for all. This pattern of Jerusalem is always how God ends one world and begins another. And it is how God will end the whole world and usher in the new creation. For the pattern of Jerusalem *is* the pattern of Jesus.

For what Jesus predicts for His disciples is precisely what is soon going to happen to Him: He was delivered up for tribulation; He was killed; He was hated by all; liars brought false accusations; He was abandoned by His closest companions in the greatest crisis of His life; love grew cold, and some did not endure to the end. For Jesus, those events were not signs of defeat, of death, or frustrations of His work. They were the beginning of birth pains, the birth pains that come to a climax on the cross and birthed the kingdom of God.

For the kingdom of Jesus does not, and will not, grow like a silicon valley tech start-up. It's not all hype and PR and marketing and branding. It's not rapid growth, quick returns, and then eventual collapse. It's much more like giving birth. And I don't know this myself, but I've heard that hurts. But on the other side of labour there is life!

For the kingdom of Jesus grows through turmoil and then triumph.

Through suffering and then success.

Through death and then resurrection.

It is always the way of the cross and then the crown.

THE PATTERN FOR US

And so this must also be the pattern for us.

And when you think about it, the experience of a first century Christian is not so different to our experience in the 21st century.

Christians today might be labelled as foolish, and sometimes dangerous. We see many Christian leaders capitalising on the chaos with all manner of concerns which are a distraction from Christ and his kingdom. Many water down the message of the gospel to make it more palatable to modern ears.

I'm sure we all have sad experiences of friends and family falling away from the faith, or just sliding into indifference.

And so how do we respond when it feels like the world is breaking apart? How do we keep following Jesus when everything is falling to pieces? How do we keep serving our Master when the world seems such a mess? Well we need to remember the pattern of Jerusalem and the pattern of Jesus.

For when God dismantles a world and forms a new one, we can expect the same things. We can expect wars and rumours of wars, conflicts and chaos - but this is not the end; we can expect great tribulation, the hatred and enmity of all who want to protect the decaying old world directed against Christians who are hoping for a new world - but this is not the end; we can expect false prophets who will mislead many; we can expect that many will fall away because of the pressure, and that even the elect will endure only with great difficulty - but this is not the end; we can expect the opportunity to witness to the ends of our world before the end comes - and then the end comes.

And so, as we read our newspapers and watch our TVs, or scroll our social media feed, we need to recall that, for Jesus, much of this turmoil is not a sign of the end. These are *birth pains*; a sign that God is beginning something new.

And so here, I think, is the challenge to us, from God's Word today:

What if the very conditions which we can interpret as barriers for the gospel, are in reality, the first sings of new life and blessing? What if those things which cause us to shrink back, hold our tongue and hide our faith are the very things which should motivate us to go out, to speak boldly and to shine the light of the gospel?

What if all the mess in the world is actually a sign that God is moving and shaking, and that the time is ripe for revival?

Then we won't be alarmed, nor will we be idle.

We won't buy into panic, nor will we be passive.

We won't give into lawlessness, nor will we let our love run cold.

We won't slack off but we will serve Jesus our master.

We won't protect ourselves, but we'd boldly proclaim the gospel, whatever the cost.

We won't just carry on doing what we've always done, but we'll keenly await the coming of Jesus, watching and waiting for how he will work again in our world today.

Now that won't always be easy. And it won't always be clear to us what God is doing, and our service of Jesus won't always bear immediate fruit. But this passage teaches us that Jesus speaks words that are TRUE. And so we can build a whole life on Jesus' words – a life strong enough to withstand whatever storms we might face in this world.

The point of this passage then is not to endow us with some secret knowledge of coming events. Instead it should equip us to *endure* coming events – whatever they may be. The point is not to make us good diviners of the future, but good *disciples*, who keep following Jesus whatever the future brings. The point is not to turn us into apocalyptic seers, but to make us *spiritual long-distance runners*. In short, the point of this passage is to make us more like Jesus, the Jesus who birthed a new world through the labor of His cross.

“And so [in the words of Hebrews 12] let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:1-3)