

Sermons on Matthew

Knowing the Season

Matthew 24:3

With Study Questions

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Now 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 of the end of the age?”**
(Matthew 24:3)

Introduction—An Imminent Judgment

We now approach a primary theme in Matthew, which is the cataclysmic end of the Old Covenant—a religious system, though established by God, that had become so evil and ungodly that God would turn it into a heap of ruins (Jeremiah 26:18). The kingdom of God would no longer reside within the borders of one nation—it would be an international kingdom (Matthew 21:43), which was always God’s design (Genesis 12:3).

A casual reading of Matthew reveals what might be considered an inexplicable imminence regarding the judgment of God. We tend to conveniently ignore these passages because it’s difficult to weave them into our preconceptions of what the Bible says. We should neither ignore, nor contort, but rather seek to understand.

Matthew opens his gospel with a record of John the Baptist preaching of this imminent judgment—**“the ax is laid to the root of the trees... His winnowing fan is in His hand... He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire”** (Matthew 3:10b, 12). When Jesus sent His apostles to the lost sheep of Israel to preach, He told them to make haste because they wouldn’t make it through the **“cities of Israel”** before His coming in judgment (Matthew 10:23). He chastised the spiritual leaders of Israel for their lack of ability to know the **“signs of the times”** they were living in (Matthew 16:1-3). Jesus taught that He was going to come in judgment at a time when some of His listeners would still be alive (Matthew 16:28). The chapter just prior to the one we’re currently studying makes it abundantly clear that the generation currently living in Jerusalem, in terms of evil, had reached critical mass. On that generation the justice of God would be poured out (Matthew 23:35, 36).

This was both a severe and glorious event. It was severe in that it was God’s judgment on evil. God would use an army (Luke 21:20) that had no concern in honoring His name to judge Jerusalem and leave no stone of the temple unturned (Matthew 24:2). Yet at the same time it was glorious, for it marked the beginning of the New Covenant through which God would bless all the earth.

Like the cross itself, God uses the hands of sinful men to accomplish His glorious deeds of redemption and restoration. Sometimes it appears as if righteousness is losing. We think—we hope—that God will someday work it all out for good. But that’s not a proper understanding of Romans 8:28. When we’re given eyes to see, we’ll know that God loses no battles. But this only makes sense when the glory of God is our chief concern.

The Lord has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom (Proverbs 16:4).

Truly the subject before us this morning is one of mass confusion in today’s church. The verses before us are generally taken (I would argue wrenched out of context) for events which will occur, not merely in the apostles’ future, but in our future. Scholars of this position assert that these two chapters (Matthew 24 and 25) are of little practical concern for us.

Walvoord and Zuck comment on the questions asked by the apostles as they relate to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. They say, “the sign of the Lord’s coming and the end of the Age...have nothing to do with the church, which Jesus said He would build (16:18). The church is not present in any sense in chapters 24 and 25.”¹

But this seems to be such a radical left turn in the flow of Matthew. From chapters 3 to 23 it’s all about the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees. It’s about the judgment of Jerusalem and razing of the temple to ashes. Then all of the sudden we’re launched into a 21st century Tribulation and hunt for the anti-Christ. No wonder it’s such a confusing subject. Allow me to add to the confusion.

Now 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 of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3)

The Question

Jesus had just informed His disciples that the temple in Jerusalem was about to be destroyed. As we’ve seen, this imminent judgment has surfaced quite regularly through Matthew. The disciples come to Him privately (in Mark 13:3, we learn it was Peter, James, John and Andrew) and ask a question.

¹Walvoord, J. F. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Mt 24:1). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The disciples want to know when this judgment will take place. And they want to know what signs will reveal His coming and the end of the age. People seek to make this a more complicated question than it is, as if the disciples are asking questions about different events—some say they're asking when the temple will be destroyed and when is the world coming to an end. But the parallel passage in Luke makes it evident that they're only asking about one event.

So they asked Him, saying, “_Teacher, but when will these things be? And what sign *will there be* when these things are about to take place?_” (Luke 21:7)

The “these things” are one event. There is only one concern the disciples have—they want to be knowledgeable of the time and signs surrounding the destruction of the temple—the fall of Jerusalem. They want to know of the signs of the times; what the Bible often calls the season *kairon*.

Knowing the Season

There appears to be a huge conflict pertaining to what we should or should not know when it comes to the season of God's judgment. For example, Jesus has some harsh words for the Pharisees and Sadducees regarding their ignorance of the season of their judgment:

**He answered and said to them, “_When it is evening you say, ‘_It will be fair weather, for the sky is red_’; ⁻³⁻ and in the morning, ‘_It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening._’ __Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times
(*kairon*—seasons) (Matthew 16:2, 3).²**

In Luke:

Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how *is it* you do not discern __this time? (Luke 12:56)

²The New King James Version. 1996, c1982 (Mt 16:1-3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Again in Luke:

For days will come upon you when your enemies will __build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, ⁻⁴⁴⁻ __and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and __they will not leave in you one stone upon another, __because you did not know the time (*kairon*—season) of your visitation_” (Luke 19:43, 44).

Yet, at the ascension, where we’re told that Jesus will return in the same manner in which He ascended (in bodily form at the Second Coming), Jesus has just the opposite to say regarding knowing the seasons.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “_Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?_” ⁻⁷⁻ And He said to them, “_It is not for you to __know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.” (Acts 1:6, 7)

The term “**a thief in the night**” is a common expression taken from the Apostle Paul regarding the (supposed) suddenness of the Second Coming and our utter lack of ability to know when it is going to take place. But let us read his letter to first century Christians where the term is used. Notice what he assumes they know.

But concerning __the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. ⁻²⁻ For you yourselves know perfectly that __the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. ⁻³⁻ For when they say, “_Peace and safety!_” then __sudden destruction comes upon them, __as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. ⁻⁴⁻ __But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. ⁻⁵⁻ You are all __sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. ⁻⁶⁻ __Therefore let us not sleep, as others *do*, but __let us watch and be __sober (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6).

Paul seems to be under the impression that they know (at least have a very good idea) of what precedes the Day. The Day is not going to be like a thief to them—they are to keep their eyes open. But if this event isn’t

going to happen for thousands of years, exactly what is it they're looking for? This is highly problematic!

So, are we to know the season, or not to know the season? The difficulty is assuaged a bit, if we recognize that there are two different events that many have somehow converged into one. There is a season they were to know of (the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and end of the Old Covenant—Jesus will speak of that season in His Olivet Discourse), and there is a season that no one knows (the Second Coming) as we read in Acts 1:7.

Endless Tribulation

Another understanding of the season of tribulation is that it is to be understood as a symbolic presentation of the Christian experience throughout all of history—a sort of endless tribulation. The difficulties we read of in the Olivet Discourse (which is merely an abbreviated version of the Revelation)³, it is asserted, are designed for our understanding of our trials and of Christ's victory and judgment over the evil that will continually be present until glory.

There is great merit to this position. Especially when we consider that similar Old Testament records of historical and political events and judgments are used to convey the nature of God's spiritual deliverance and eternal judgment.

For example, when the king of Babylon is told of his judgment, he is referred to as Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12). It is easily argued that this has, as its design, a foreshadowing of Christ's victory of Satan. In the same way deliverance from Egypt foreshadowed deliverance from sin (1 Corinthians 10:1-5), and so on.

So to the extent that we learn in these passages of God's judgments and blessings, it is safe to conclude that these passages spiritually apply throughout all of history. My children, for example, learn how I will respond to disobedience in the future by the way I responded to disobedience in the past.

But the danger with this method is that it tends to ignore the historical significance of the event. Jesus is addressing a particular generation regarding particular events and giving them particular and specific instructions (e.g. earthquakes, pestilence and famines, fleeing to the mountains of Judea, etc.).

³ Notice that the three synoptic gospels all have references to the tribulation whereas John seemed to save his description for the writing of the Revelation.

To overly spiritualize these events diminishes the significance of God's judgments and call in our lives in history (by history I mean outward observable events rather than invisible spiritual events). Therefore those who hold this view gravitate away from the value of Christians having an impact upon culture.

We need to understand that God judges in eternity and history, and blesses in eternity and history. His blessings and judgments in history inform us (at least at some level) of His blessings and judgments in eternity. But we should not conclude from this that He no longer judges in history or that God is unconcerned with historical events.

How Do We Read Matthew 24?

So how do we read Matthew 24? I think we should read Matthew 24 the same way we read any other book in the Bible. When we read the Bible we recognize there was an original audience to whom a book or letter was written. It was addressing their situation. It addresses our situation only to the extent that we can ascertain that we've fallen into the same error.

For example, in the first chapter of Galatians, Paul rebukes the churches of Galatia for turning away to a "**different gospel**" (**Galatians 1:6**). This doesn't mean that every church who reads Galatians throughout history has turned away to a different gospel. But to the extent that the passage applies the warning goes forth.

Not every generation will suffer the tribulation we read of in Matthew 24. But to the extent that similar events take place, the warnings and encouragements apply—it is very similar to the way we read the Old Testament.

The Futurist and Idealist

I've tried to briefly explain the *futurist* and *idealist* approaches to Matthew 24. In short, the *futurist* who believes these events in Matthew 24 to be the inevitable expectation of our future (events which precede the Second Coming) have ignored the context of the passage. This leads their followers to believe that, as a cultural influence, the Christian faith (as Clarence Larkin puts it) is a failure.⁴ Matthew 24 is the future of the world.

⁴ Clarence Larkin *The Greatest Book on dispensational Truth in the World* (Rev. Clarence Larkin Est. 2802 N. Park Ave., Philadelphia 32, Pa. U. S. A., 1918), p. 77 1/2

The *idealist*, on the other hand, tends to dismiss the value of the Christian faith as a world converting and cultural redeeming entity. I think they're both mistaken.

There was an event that took place 2000 years ago. The Old Covenant church waxed cold, crucified its Messiah, and God judged them. We learn in this passage of man's natural hostility to the gospel. To the extent that Christians find themselves in similar situations—to the extent that we see and, in some fashion, experience glimpses of their trials this passage is of immense value.

It is without question that those who have proclaimed the faith have, throughout history, found themselves the objects of hatred, betrayal, persecution and death—this comes as no surprise to the faithful who find themselves in similar situation, for they have read Matthew 24. It is precisely here that they are called to heed the words of Jesus when He said **“But he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13)**. It is in this context that we will properly understand the passage before us, which we shall pursue in our next meeting.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the passages in Matthew which speak of imminent judgment. How do you explain that Judgment Day hasn't happened yet (pages 2, 3)?
2. In what respect does God lose battles? Explain (page 3)?
3. What were the disciples asking Jesus about in verse 3 (pages 3, 4)?
4. The Bible seems to indicate that we should know the season of God's judgment. It also indicates that it is not for us to know the season of Christ's return. How do you explain this (pages 4-6)?
5. What are the merits and weaknesses of viewing the Christian faith as endless tribulation (pages 6, 7)?
6. How should we read Matthew 24 (pages 7, 8)?
7. Discuss the futurist and idealist approach to Matthew 24 and their strengths and weaknesses (page 8).