

Birth pains of the end

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Date: 05 October 2025

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[0 : 00] We'll be reading from Matthew 24, the first 35 verses.

! 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.

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?

And Jesus answered them, All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

And the end of the day will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations.

[2 : 00] And then the end will come. So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place, let the reader understand, Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house. And let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas, for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days.

Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. 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 had not been cut short, no human being would be saved.

But for the sake of the elect, those days will be cut short.

Then if anyone says to you, Look, here is the Christ, or there he is, do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

[3 : 07] See, I have told you beforehand. So if they say to you, Look, he is in the wilderness, do not go out. If they say, Look, he is in the inner rooms, do not believe it.

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. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, 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. From the fig tree, learn its lesson.

As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near at the very gates.

[4 : 17] 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. Well, good morning, everyone.

Well, before we get into the passage, this is Chris and Jess Brown's final Sunday with us. Chris, you've been in this church your entire life, right?

Yeah, wow. And Jess meeting Sam Jenkins at uni, and then Chris eating broccoli in church, and coming into this church, coming to the Lord.

We're going to miss you both so much. You've been faithfully serving. I'm not going to list them all, because I'm going to forget all the ways you've been serving in the church over the years.

What came into my mind was even quench back in the day. But, anyway, many years of relationship. So please grab them before they leave today, because, yeah, they're going to Taree.

[5 : 23] Chris has got a full-time job there. So, yeah, let me pray for you now, and pray for us as we come to God's Word as well. Yeah, Father, we thank you for Chris and Jess, and just more than

friendship there, our brother and sister in the Lord Jesus.

And every goodbye hurts, even when it's for good reasons. And so I pray that you would comfort them in this change.

Thank you that we have... We know that there is a great reunion when you return, when we'll never have to part ways again. We pray that you'll give them a Bible-based church that they can flourish in and serve in.

So we just ask that you'll go before them in this new season. And, Father, I pray for us now as we come to sit under your Word. Give us understanding. Give us belief.

And I pray that we will be changed from your Word, what we hear today. In Jesus' name I pray it. Amen. Amen. Well, the late Pastor Tim Keller, many people, many Christians use some of his phrases and they don't even realise it.

[6 : 49] And one person calls them Kellerisms. People just use his phrase, they don't realise it. I want to start today with a quarterwoodism. Major on the majors and minor on the minors.

Now, he's not having a go at little children. But I pray that that phrase, or at least the principle of that phrase, we never lose sight of because we're going to unravel as a church if we do.

When it comes to unity in this church and unity with other gospel-believing churches in doctrine and in church practice, we need a major on the major doctrines and keep the minor details, keep them in their proper place.

We get that reversed and we get ourselves in all sorts of trouble. Some Christians die on this hill of end times theology called eschatology and we can divide much too quickly on this.

Minoring on this doesn't mean you ignore these passages and become a pan-millennium that is just going to all pan out somehow in the end.

[8 : 08] We're meant to study all these passages but we need a major on what all Christians believe and we express it in the ancient creeds. Christ will return.

And the ultimate result, as we heard in the children's talk, is judgment and rest for his people in the new heavens and earth.

We all believe in that. We need a major on that and all the details we need a minor on. For the average secular person, the future is uncertain.

It is filled with the prospect of death and decay. The present is big. That's all that matters. The present is big, future, uncertain.

But the Christian, it's the other way around. It's the present. That's small and uncertain. But our future is massive and bright.

[9 : 17] The Christian life is always, it's like tiptoeing over the edge of the threshold of eternity. Not in a panic, but there is an urgency that these days are short, are small.

We can't think too often about the hope that scripture gives us. You can't think too often about it because it's that hope that fuels us being faithful to Christ and persevering.

We need to think about it often. So, where we're up to in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has just pronounced judgment on the Pharisees.

And until he goes to the cross, his attention is now turning to his disciples. He's preparing his people for how we're to live until he returns.

Now, his disciples are looking at the beautiful temple and they might have expected significant reform, really profound reform, but what he says shocked their expectations.

[10 : 35] Verse 2, Truly I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. Now, in 70 AD, Jewish national zealots to make Israel prominent, they rebelled against Rome, they murdered their own people and they installed false priests.

And that precipitated the Romans coming in, besieging the city on all sides. No one could get out. There was such a famine that historians record they ate their own defecation.

Mothers were boiling. I'm not going to finish that sentence. Some escaped to a place called Masada and the Roman army pursued them and utterly destroyed them.

Now, there have been horrific persecutions of the Jewish people under Hitler and Stalin, but what's terrifying about what happened at 70 AD, no one, no one escaped.

Now, that happened within a generation of Jesus' prophecy here. And there's historical evidence that Christians heeded this warning. When they saw these events starting, they got out of there.

[12 : 08] Now, there's three, I've come across three main ways of interpreting Matthew 24. And there's so many little offshoot variants of how to interpret this that I'm not going to go into all that.

I want to avoid confusing today. So I want to just ask, when do Christians, reading Matthew 24, where do they see the 70 AD happening?

Because that might help us understand these three views. The first view for understanding Matthew 24 is that 70 AD, the temple destruction, happened in verse 2 alone.

So when Jesus said, not one stone will be left on another. And they see the rest as literal events that are still to come at the end of history with a seven-year great tribulation.

That view means that verse 15 is talking about another literal temple is going to be built. Now, a problem I see with this view is that it stretches the meaning of generation in verse 34.

[13:26] Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. The natural reading of that is those who are hearing his words.

So that's the first view. The second view, so you see 70 AD from verse 15 all the way through to the end of verse 35. So it's taking verse 29 to 31 there as symbolic.

Not as Jesus' second coming but as symbolic of the destruction of the temple. Now, the advantage of that view, let's see if I'm losing, trying to read body language here if I'm losing you, the advantage of that view is that it all took place in that first generation then.

But those phrases in verses 29 to 31 really do sound like the second coming of Christ, especially when you see those same phrases in other New Testament passages and it's about the second coming of Christ.

I know I'm not doing these views justice. There's probably some just wriggling in their seats, want to cry out this moment, but by all means, talk about it over morning tea.

[14:42] just keep that quarterwoodism front and centre in our minds as we talk about it. I'm leaning heavily here on Don Carson.

He's co-founder of the Gospel Coalition. So a third view is verse 15 to 21 is talking about 70, what happened at 70 AD.

It's a one and a thankfully done sign. The abomination that causes desolation was that murder and installment of false high priests causing the destruction of the temple.

And the remaining signs in this chapter happened in that first generation. But they also happened in every other generation, including our own. As the New Testament elsewhere says, since Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, we are in the last days.

There are many things that can make life feel uncertain. As a parent now, I'm starting to fear for my children what world they're coming into.

[16:06] There's so many things, aren't there? The political tensions, just the social and moral breakdown, AI. There's so many things that are just unsettling.

A guy called Gavin Ortland in the US says that there's a growing trend of evangelicals, Christians, converting to Eastern Orthodoxy, especially young men, for whatever reason.

Now, this isn't like a Baptist becoming Prezi or Anglican. They must renounce, publicly renounce, Protestantism, that it's heresy.

And one of the converts to Eastern Orthodoxy suggested a reason why the trend. What's the attraction? Here's what they said. Everything's changing. Protestant churches are changing.

The Catholic church is changing. The culture is changing. The government is changing. People want something that is historic and not going to change. They want something that's stable and solid and is not built on sand.

[17:18] And so, the liturgy of it's so ancient in Eastern Orthodoxy, it feels unchanging.

That desire for stability and security that doesn't change, that is good. Don't you have that desire? We all have that desire. Nothing wrong with that desire. But there's only one thing that can't change. It is not man-made tradition. Jesus tells us these things ahead of time so that we have an anchor for our lives into something that is rock solid.

more solid than rock. He's telling us these things ahead of time so that we won't be led astray. We won't latch on to something else that says, put your life on me because I'm unchanging.

He's telling us these things to give us an anchor. So, verse 8 describes how we're to interpret these distressing things we see that rock us and give us that sense of distress.

[18:35] All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. Like a woman going into labour, there's joy to look forward to. Labour pains are evidence that the end is close.

There is permanent lasting joy up ahead. But it could be that the labour lasts one hour and she barely makes it to the hospital.

Or the longest recorded labour is 75 days. Poor. We might pray for Lauren it's not that long. Jesus is preparing us to face pitch black times and interpret them with hope. Like a woman can persevere through the pain because she knows joy is so close.

He's telling us these things so that we can interpret events in hope. So, let's go through what the pains are, the birth pains. The end times are characterised by international rivalry, wars, the world wars of last century, hundreds of millions killed.

[19:57] So many Christians were talking about this is evidence of the end of history and you can understand why. But there was also huge upheaval in the sacking of Rome around the 400s, the fall of the empire.

When we read these events, when we see them, Jesus says the end is not yet. Verse 7, we've got natural disasters like the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

Over 200,000 people killed. Some speak of climate change as we're about to annihilate ourselves. This panic but there was also a massive earthquake in the Philadelphia area in AD 64.

The Apostle Paul raised funds for the famine in Jerusalem because the crops in Egypt failed. If we were living in Myanmar with what they're going through, you can understand why you'd feel hopeless.

The earthquake, civil war and all the social effects things. But they're just birth pains. Then we've got spiritual afflictions on the church.

[21:19] We've got persecutions, verse 9. There's still many Christians being killed around the world today. Last century, we had more martyrs than all the previous centuries combined.

You can't live a godly life of integrity and not get insulted or not feel left out or kicked out. You can't. We shouldn't expect religious freedoms to continue. By all means use the avenues to say they should but it is not the norm in history.

What he's saying here, we shouldn't expect it. It gets worse. We should expect apostasy. Verse 10. Jesus himself warns that public declarations of faith of individuals and teachers and churches, some will renounce their faith. The definition of a Christian from the New Testament is someone who endures to the end.

[22:37] There's such a work on the inside that they're born again. They're breathing in the gospel truths in their local church. Divine Grace is causing them to repent of their sins regularly.

All these things mean they will persevere to the end. That's the definition of a Christian. They will persevere. So as distressing as it is when someone renounces, that too is a birth pain.

It's just a spiritual attack on the church. Love will grow cold.

Many people feel that society is getting morally worse. I think most generations say that. Some believers won't apostatize dramatically but their love for God and love for one will grow cold.

It's the lawlessness that will do it. It's being inoculated to wickedness that creeps in. I think I find myself laughing with TV series that have got an agenda of trying to say you should embrace this wickedness and I laugh along.

[23:58] We're letting our kids breathe in these movies saying ultimate truth is found inside you.

It's just being inoculated to the wickedness. It's like a frog in water slowly rising to the boil which I know is reversing the metaphor.

It's growing cold. It's this hypothermia setting in. But we should expect that sort of thing to happen. It's a warning to us but we should expect it to happen.

These birth pains are all bracketed at the start and finish by the warning of false Christ and false prophets. Verse 5 For many will come in my name saying I am the Christ and they will lead many astray and you will hear of verse 6.

And then verse 23 to 26. Look here is the Christ. Don't believe it. This age this time is marked by false teaching.

[25:14] Don't expect that false teaching to come out obviously going here I am I'm false teaching. It sneaks in. Half truths.

Human reasoning that just twists scripture and relegates scripture to the side. Now there could well be an intensification of all these things at the very end of history.

There could well be a ramping up at the very end including an antichrist. But here Jesus is warning of many.

Many. There haven't been many who have claimed to be Christ in the flesh. There's been a few. Some devastating cults. There have been some.

We could potentially apply this broader. Anyone who claims this unique connection to God. This special empowering.

[26 : 16] If you don't follow them, you are not part of God's kingdom. Be suspicious of anyone who claims a unique authority.

A special relationship with God. One, this person is going to fix the church. They're going to fix the world. If only everyone got on board with that kind of talk.

These self-appointed prophets, often inducing fear, like that South African guy just recently. The rapture was meant to be two Wednesdays ago.

But their reach online to people here is incredible. Causing lots of bad things.

But not just self-appointed prophets, but I think any Christian institution or Christian so-called teachers, we've looked at recently, that says Christ and his cross isn't enough.

[27 : 23] You need to add something. You need to add works. You need to add rituals. You need spiritual gifts. You need another book besides the Bible. You need a human tradition and institution.

You need enough repentance. You need anything that adds to his cross and simple faith and lead us astray.

I don't like thinking about all this. I don't know about you. Are you sick of me saying all this? Jesus loves us too much. He's preparing us.

He's telling us these birth signs so that we're anchored to something, to someone more rock solid than the earth itself.

Verse 35, heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. God will not change.

[28 : 35] His word, his gospel, all about him is the only thing that cannot change. His church can change but his word, his gospel is the only rock solid thing.

God please don't settle for anything less than that. He tells us these things ahead of time.

We may not understand his reasoning but he's told us. He's ruling. He knows. I don't know. He knows though.

And he even says he's cut these days short so that we all make it to the end. I think like a jeweller getting a diamond ring out of the cabinet, they don't just place it on the bench, they'll place a black mat so that the diamond shines all the more.

You've got all these distressing pains. And then verse 14, it just shines really bright in the midst of this.

[29 : 53] 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.

This is what God is doing in this era. Which is why I think eschatology is that make us focus on interpreting day or hour, literal events or filling politics and media and businesses with Christians. It's distracting from God's agenda. God's agenda is this gospel, this good news, the victory of the good news going to all the world.

This isn't an instruction to us. He's just saying, that's his agenda, he's going to do it. We can get on board with that or not. I hope we do. Well, we are. Let's do it more and more.

There were apparently two Scottish prisoners of war in Germany in World War II. There was two camps side by side.

[31 : 05] One was with the British and one with the American POWs. They acted as chaplains. They were allowed to meet at the fence in the middle every so often.

They realised the German guards didn't know Gaelic. They could share news with each other. One of the soldiers had a secret radio. One of these chaplains told the other one, Germany has surrendered.

It was so broken down, the communication. The guards didn't know that yet. It took three days for the guards to know that. But when the other chaplain went back and reported the news, there was just this cheer that went up and they didn't complain about the food anymore.

They weren't complaining anymore. They had rifles in their faces and they were smiling at the guards. They were walking around like it was a party, they said. The chaplain said we were liberated by the news before we were liberated by the guards.

That's the power of the good news of the kingdom, of Christ's cross and resurrection and ascension. He is on the throne amidst such hardships and change and uncertainty.

[32 : 28] We can smile at the guards. Christians can even willingly enter more affliction sharing this good news with those sitting in darkness because of this news.

It liberates. It feels like the spiritual war is raging. It can even get us down that God's agenda is losing.

But the war has been decisively won 2,000 years ago. That's the good news. When he died and rose victorious, Satan, he's done.

Our sin is done. The world is done. Death is done. It is decisively won. It's finished.

We're living in between the times of that decisive victory and just the wrapping up. Someone's used the illustration, another World War II illustration, is when the Allied troops landed on Normandy, once they got conquered there.

[33 : 49] The war was decisively done. Everyone knew that. Germany knew that. The Allies were advancing on the Western Front. Russia was pushing on the Eastern Front. It was done. But the war was still raging.

People were still dying. But the victory was won. The cross and resurrection is our D-Day. day. We're just waiting for that V-E day when we're just going to be shouting and celebrating in the streets when all the rifles are put down.

Like the birth pains, to mix metaphors, we can look at all these distressing, changing things and we can go, joy is so soon.

which brings us to verse 27 to 31. They describe the obvious, indisputable, glorious appearing, coming of Christ.

I don't know about you, sometimes I see lightning in the sky and I start counting in my head to work out how far it is. Sometimes I just keep counting because I never hear the thunder.

[35 : 10] That's not as close as I thought it was. It's just so far away. That's the point of this lightning metaphor. When Christ comes, everyone will see it. East and west, everyone will see it.

I won't have to tell you, you won't have to tell me. It will be obvious, you won't miss it. I think that's the point of the vulture thing too. When there's a carcass, no vulture is missing out on that.

Everyone will know. After this whole era from that first generation where all those signs were taking place through to our day today, all these, immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man. Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn 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. This is the winding up of the universe.

[36 : 24] He's not riding on a donkey anymore. He's coming victorious. There's a banner, there's a loud trumpet call. All authority is his right now but it's contested.

On that day there's no contest. And those who have placed their joy and their hope here in this world rejecting Jesus will mourn.

And there's a poem that captures this. I dream that the great judgment morning had dawned and the trumpet had blown. I dream that the nations had gathered to judgment before the white throne. The rich man was there but his money had melted and vanished away. A pauper he stood in the judgment. His debts were too heavy to pay.

The great man was there but his greatness. When death came was left far behind. The angel that opened the records not a trace of his greatness could find.

[37 : 42] But for the believer that same moment, oh that celebration, he's sending his armies of angels to keep us safe and gather us.

one of the effects of this passage on me is just thankfulness for my salvation.

Not that I chose him but that he is. I would have been mourning on that day but now I can lift my head looking forward to it. well the disciples asked when will these things be and some Christians, some teachers, they use this passage to do the exact opposite of Jesus' stated purpose.

They point to all these events and they're trying to stir up alarm among believers but Jesus says, see that you are not alarmed. for this must take place but the end is not yet.

These are the beginning of the birth pains. But that not being alarmed is balanced by verse 32 to 35 of the fig tree lesson.

[39 : 04] All these things which doesn't include Christ's returns, all these signs, that doesn't include Christ's return because if he's back, he's back. You don't need a sign.

All these things, we can know he's really near. He's at the very gates about to come in. So Jesus in the New Testament is calling for a proper balance here.

Don't be too quick to say the end is really close. If it distracts you from God's agenda, proclaiming the gospel, it can create a sense of panic and uncertainty.

We're meant to be anchored in his word. He's told us ahead of time. But there's this pulsating hope. There's this, he could come back any moment in my lifetime. there's this tension there, this balance.

[40 : 15] Now, if you're feeling like this will never happen, I'm sure Noah's contemporaries were pretty skeptical too when it took a hundred years to build that boat.

it happened. I'm sure Jeremiah, when he said Babylon is coming, they said the temple, the temple God would never.

He's coming. 2 Peter 3 9, So I'll just finish with how then should we be living with this balance?

Some Christians pray and talk as if we're meant to rise above all the pains in this life. That's not the Christian way.

We're meant to endure the distress. We're still in the world. Nor should we fixate on reading political events and prophetic things people say.

[41 : 50] It is also crazy to place our hope here. Now I'm convicted by this myself. It's crazy to make the present big when it's not big.

It's so uncertain. It will pass away. there are things not to do. I think this passage is pushing us to make our priority as a local church his priority, what he's doing, which is verse 14.

This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world. Knowing he's ruling now, knowing he's at the very gates, let's get on board with his agenda.

seeing his word take deeper root in each other's lives, raising and training and sending up more gospel workers from this church. Let's pray that missionaries will come from our own church to go to places where there is not a church yet.

That's going to cost us. That's going to cost us financially and relationally. All those things in our life that we call non-negotiables that we need to actually put aside for the sake of this.

[43 : 07] It's going to cost us. Year 12, so you guys, if I can just briefly talk to you guys, you're entering an uncertain world.

A HSC result is not a great foundation. As much as the world is telling you that, his word is the foundation. I know where you all are, I should be looking both ways here, but his word is the foundation to build your life on.

Living for his word in his church and his mission, that's a life well lived. The present is small, the future is big, the victory is won.

His word is unchanging, not some liturgy, his word is unchanging. Let's smile at the guards. these are the very gates.

Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, I pray that the hope you have purchased for us in the blood of Christ would fill our imagination much, much more so that we will be faithful to you and we will show a hope that is deeper than what anyone else in this world has so that we can display the beauty of the good news of the gospel.

[44 : 58] people and I pray that you would use us as a church to get on board with your agenda. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.