

# Signs of The End

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the AM service on November 30th, 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.

The sermon is entitled, Signs of the End, and is from Matthew 24, verses 1-14.

Please be seated. You may like to have open the second Bible reading from Matthew's Gospel, page 805. Today is Advent Sunday, and Advent is traditionally the time of year in the church when we think about Jesus coming again.

And so for the next three Sunday mornings I'm preaching through Matthew 24, which are Jesus' own words about his coming again, as we shall see. Let's pray. God, we pray that you will take your word and write it on our hearts, that we may trust in you more and be better equipped to be servants of Jesus Christ.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. When will it be? Everybody wants to know when. When will the exam results come?

[ 1 : 19 ] When will I get my Christmas presents? When is my doctor's appointment? When will my results be out for a medical test or something like that? And it's the same with Jesus' return.

Everybody would like to know when. When is Jesus coming back? And for the last 2,000 years, people have been fascinated with the question of when.

In 1,000 BC and just before that time, there were many people in the ancient or medieval world who had thought that Jesus would come back because it was now 1,000 years since he'd first been on earth.

In the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther and those who were with him and against him all had a heightened expectation that Jesus was about to come back. And some people thought it would be in July 1530 and others in 1532 and so on for whatever reason.

Many sects have begun because of the determination of a particular date, time or place for when Jesus would return. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons amongst others.

[ 2 : 20 ] Some of you will remember some years ago when Don Dunstan was Premier of South Australia. A group in South Australia going to Glenelg Beach, I think it was, expecting the Lord to return.

Some of them were sceptical but there was this heightened expectation that this was the place and that this would be the day. And as we approach the year 2000, there are others as well who believe that Jesus' return is imminent.

That it's coming in the year 2000. I don't know why 2000, because Jesus was born in a few years BC, so he's already had his 2000th birthday and is yet to return. When I was in England, a country noted for its eccentrics.

There was a lady in our church. Present company excluded. There was a lady in my church, very eccentric lady, who believed that in the year 2000, Jesus would return and because she was a Pisces, she'd end up on Jupiter.

Believe me, she encouraged me to pray that Jesus would come quickly. The disciples were like everybody else. When will Jesus come?

[ 3 : 34 ] And they asked him that very question in the reading that we've had. Jesus had been in Jerusalem, in the temple, and he'd left the temple at the beginning of this passage for the last time.

For this chapter comes from the last week, the last few days of Jesus' earthly life before the crucifixion. And as he left the temple, his disciples commented about it.

So the chapter begins, as Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Jesus had been there many times.

They were not acting as touring guides here. I suspect their comment was about, aren't these buildings beautiful? Aren't they grand? Aren't they enormous? Or something to that effect.

Certainly the size of the Jerusalem temple was large. The stones that underpinned the platform that the temple was built on, some of which you can still see today in the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, were much, much bigger than the stones of Stonehenge.

[ 4 : 36 ] Some of them, I gather, were up to 120 tons. And they were very beautifully laid. You still cannot get a knife or something sharp down between some of those stones.

And so well have they been put together by Herod the Great. Maybe they were commenting about its beauty. Ancient rabbis said that if you haven't seen Herod's temple, you've never seen a beautiful building.

It was certainly elaborate and ornate. Gone now, of course. But even grander, bigger and more beautiful than the Dome of the Rock which is currently on the site of the old temple.

Certainly, without a doubt, it was the most impressive building in the ancient Middle or Near East. Well, Jesus' reply to his disciples' comments is somewhat surprising for them.

He asked them, You see all these, don't you? Truly I tell you, an emphatic statement coming up, that's why he says that. Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another.

[ 5 : 37 ] All will be thrown down. That's some prediction of destruction. Not one stone will be left. Not a little bit of earthquake. Not a little bit of masonry falling down.

But not one stone, not even those 120 ton stones will be left, one on top of the other, he says. His words are surprising because for the Jews of their day and his day, they believed that this temple was indestructible.

They believed that this temple would stand forever and God would protect it from any attack. So Jesus' words are very surprising.

He's saying, in effect, don't be beguiled by its importance, its size, its beauty or grandeur. It is going to be destroyed. And Jesus himself has said these words as he leaves it for the last time.

He walks out of Jerusalem, down into the Kidron Valley and then back up the other side on what's called the Mount of Olives. And there on the Mount of Olives he sits. Mount of Olives is actually higher than Jerusalem.

[ 6 : 46 ] So from near the top of the Mount of Olives you can look down on Jerusalem and the most dominant building for him would clearly have been the temple. Seated there, Jesus has done something that's perhaps prophetic.

In the Old Testament, in the book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel has a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving Jerusalem and its temple. The glory lifts up in this vision and hovers over the threshold of the temple, perhaps about where Jesus was first asked these questions, and then it leaves to the east and then pauses for a time on the Mount of Olives.

Indeed, it's on the Mount of Olives that many Jews expect the Messiah to return. So Jesus perhaps has done something prophetic in leaving the temple as a sign of judgment and now on the Mount of Olives where the glory of the Lord paused in Ezekiel's vision 600 years before as God's judgment on Jerusalem.

The disciples come up to him now privately, away from the crowds, and they ask him, tell us, when will this be?

And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? Two questions. When will this be? When will the temple be destroyed? When will not one stone be left upon another?

[ 8 : 01 ] And also tell us, what will be the sign of your coming again? That is, of the end of the age. How will we know when it's coming? Is in effect what they're asking. And all that follows in this next chapter, the next three sermons, is Jesus' answer to those questions.

When will it be? And what will be the signs of the end of the age? Well, in today's reading, the things we look at are certainly signs leading up to the end.

But they're not the immediate end themselves. Jesus gives a number of signs. In verse 4, he answers them firstly, Beware that no one leads you astray.

Why does he say that? For many will come in my name, saying, I am the Messiah. And they will lead many astray. In Jesus' own day, before him, during his lifetime, after his lifetime, and certainly leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, there were many who claimed to be the Messiah.

But of course, that's been going on throughout history as well. But Jesus is not so much concerned with them as how his disciples and followers respond. Don't be led astray, he says.

[ 9 : 14 ] Don't be led astray. You see, they're false messiahs. The end will come when the true Messiah comes. So when you see a false messiah, somebody who falsely claims to be Jesus

Christ, the Lord, God himself, someone come to bring about the end of history, and there are people who claim that in every day and age, don't be misled by them.

They're not the true messiah. And therefore, even though in one sense it's a sign of the end that there are such people around, it's not the end. Because the end will be when the true messiah comes.

Well, the second sign that Jesus talks about in verse 6 is, you will hear wars and rumours of wars. See that you're not alarmed, for this must take place. But the end is not yet.

It was true in Jesus' own day. There were plenty of wars, and there were many rumours of wars. Wars of the Jews uprising against the Romans who were ruling over them. But Jesus says, don't be alarmed.

All those things are happening. All those things are in a sense a sign of the end. But the end is not yet, he says. More must come. And he goes on to clarify what he means by that in verses 7 and 8. [10:28] For nation will rise against nation, in Jesus' day as in ours, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

When a woman is in labour, as many of you have experienced, there is pain before the joy of childbirth. Jesus is saying that that's an analogy for the end times.

That leading up to the joy of the messianic age, when the Messiah of God will come back again and bring in the kingdom of God's perfection, there is pain, war, rumour of war, famine, earthquakes, strife, false messiahs.

That's the pain leading up to the joy of the birth. So don't be misled, he says. Don't jump to quick conclusions when you see these sorts of things happening in the world. Yes, they're signs that the end is coming, but they're not the end itself.

They're not the immediate precursor to the end, but rather just the beginnings of the birth pains. Jesus, you see, is dampening down premature enthusiasm that his kingdom is about to arrive.

[11:42] The end is near, yes, that's true, but he refuses to say how near. All these things, it's true, are signs of the end, but they're not signs of an immediate end.

The end is not yet, he says. So if you see a war, or a rumour of war, or a false messiah comes along your path, or there's an earthquake or a famine, then that ought to remind us that, yes, we live in the end times, in difficult times, in times of pain, but it's not the end itself.

No war, no famine, no earthquake should make us think suddenly the end is about to come. That is, none of these things can be used as predictions for when the end will come. Jesus will go on later to say, in two weeks time, we'll see this, that the end will come suddenly.

That is, he's saying, all these are signs, but we can't use the signs to predict a date. It's interesting, in the Gulf War of six years ago, there was a glut of books in the American Christian market about this being the end of history, the messiah's about to come, the war that would end all wars and usher in God's kingdom, and so on.

What rubbish. It's just another war. There have been wars every century since Jesus spoke. Yes, it's a sign of the end coming, but it's not a sign of the end itself.

[13:02] No war, no famine, no earthquake, no false messiah can tell us or make us think that this is the end. Jesus' words occurred in about 33 AD.

Judea at the time was ruled by the Romans, and for a long time there'd been a traditional, uneasy, even tense relationship between the two groups. All of that came to a head in the 60s, 30 years or so after Jesus' death.

The Romans responded by destroying Jerusalem, absolutely, raising it, burning it to the ground, and the temple along with it. Indeed, for many decades, Jerusalem was virtually uninhabitable until it was rebuilt by Hadrian in the second century.

In the lead up to this time between Jesus' death and the destruction of Jerusalem, there were many false messiahs, wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines and so on. But Jesus says these are just the beginning of the end, not the end itself.

But having said that, the destruction of Jerusalem is very significant. It may be a long way apart historically or chronologically from the very end of history which still awaits us.

[14:17] But nonetheless, it's a cameo of what that end will be like. God's judgment against a sinful world. The two events are related. The first, the destruction of Jerusalem, is a foretaste of what the end will be like.

Sometimes in Matthew's gospel, this chapter, as we'll see in the next two weeks as well, it's hard to pick exactly what Jesus is referring to at different times. Is he talking about the destruction of Jerusalem is he talking about the end of history?

Very difficult sometimes to determine that. But because the two events are in a sense related, one is a foretaste of another, in a sense that that shouldn't trouble us too much.

Jesus is referring one back to the other, back to one again. A short while ago, I saw the film *The English Patient*, a film that won many Academy Awards this year.

It's a film in which somebody is ill and dying. And has flashbacks as he gradually remembers what has happened to him and why he's in this situation. A friend of mine saw this film and found it very confusing because he wasn't always able to pick what was now and what was the flashback in this person's mind.

[15:31] I must say, I didn't find it all that confusing to see the difference between the two. But in a way, Matthew 24 is a little bit like that. One minute focusing on Jerusalem being destroyed, one minute focusing on the end of history.

And it sort of fluctuates one to the other. Sometimes there is confusion as we read the chapter. But I hope at the end of this three weeks, the important lessons of it are clear to us. Well, Jesus is not finished in his description about the signs of the end.

In verse 9, he goes on now to give some signs about how the end times affect the church, Christians, the followers of Jesus Christ. Then he says in verse 9, they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death.

And you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Persecution, you see, is the first sign for the church. And from the year after Jesus died on the cross to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, Christians faced persecution.

Firstly from Jews, most notably St. Paul before he was converted. But then in the 60s, especially from the Emperor Nero who killed Christians in Rome as a way of passing the buck for the destruction of Rome by fire.

[16:49] But that didn't stop there, of course. In every decade of every century ever since Jesus lived, Christians have been killed for Christian faith. And more Christians have been martyred and persecuted in this century and around the world than in every century combined up to it.

But Jesus again is saying this is not the immediate end. Just because you face persecution mustn't make you think or calculate or predict that the end is just around the corner.

Because persecution is a typical sign of the church between Jesus' resurrection and his second coming whenever that may be. One of the offshoots of persecution Jesus goes on to say in verse 10 is that people fall away.

many will fall away from faith, that is. And they will betray one another and hate one another. Some people say that the persecution of the church does great things for the church.

One only has to look at China this century to see how the persecuted Christian church in China has thrived under communist rule. But that's not the full story. Persecution is very often a bad thing for the church because Christians give up the faith so often.

[18:01] When they're faced with the threat of death it's very easy to be tempted to renounce Christian faith. And there have been many great Christians over the decades and centuries who at the face of persecution or at the point of death have renounced their Lord in order to preserve their own life.

Jesus says that's a typical sign of the church in the end times. We in Australia have it very comfortably I think. Our Christian brothers and sisters in many countries face death even today. Maybe one day the same will happen in Australia. Not only that but those who give up their faith then betray their former Christian brothers and sisters. That if somebody renounces Christian faith they escape with their life and then in turn they hate those who hold on to their Christian faith. Whether it's out of guilt or revenge or whatever we don't know and it doesn't matter. But they betray their Christian brothers and sisters. There are many stories in the Soviet Union of where that has been the case in the last few decades of this century.

More than that Jesus goes on to say in verse 11 there will be false prophets. Not false messiahs this time but false prophets. There's these people within the church who teach falsehood. Who lead people astray from the truth about Jesus Christ.

[19:21] And that's true in our own age as it was in Jesus' age and every age in between. Those who teach wrong things about God and about the Lord Jesus Christ and leading many astray.

And because of all these things he says in verse 12 another sign will be that the love of many will grow cold. I think he means here the love of people who keep on as Christians. But their love either for God or for each other or both grows cold. They lose their enthusiasm for Christian faith when they're under pressure. These are people who perhaps hold on to their faith but now perhaps close up.

In an area of persecution and betrayal it's very easy to lose trust in others. Is he going to betray me? Is she going to turn me in? So Christian love dampens and loses its heat and enthusiasm in such circumstances.

they're the signs of the period leading up to the end. It's a somber picture for Christian life and the life of the church.

[ 20 : 25 ] But remember these are the birth pangs not the end itself. And these signs are typical of every age from Jesus to now and until indeed he comes again.

Those Christians who think that the world is going to get better and easier and more glorious and gradually the kingdom will come in I think it seems to me from here they're wrong. All the time between Jesus' first coming and his second coming is typified by difficulty strife war persecution and even martyrdom for Christian people.

None of these signs enable us to calculate when. None of them enable us to predict when Jesus will come again. In fact they don't answer the question that the disciples asked.

when will this be? Jesus avoids answering the question when. Why does he do that? Why doesn't he give a date?

Firstly he doesn't know the date. He tells us that later on in the chapter. We'll see that in two weeks. But secondly he's more concerned about the danger of being led astray. The danger of deception and falsehood.

[ 21 : 34 ] Yes he's saying here that there will be a delay before the end comes. But your key thing he says to his followers is not to know when I'm coming but to avoid being deceived in the time leading up to my coming.

Don't be deceived by those who spread falsehood. The obverse of that would be that we hold on to the truth. Hold on to Jesus' words.

Know the truth so that therefore we can identify those who are not of the truth. we should always remember that anybody who claims to know when is wrong or they're fluked it because Jesus says he doesn't know and nobody knows and nobody will know until it happens apart from God the Father.

So anybody who says the world is ending on such and such a date you can be sure they're wrong or it's a fluke. but when the end does come and when Jesus does return we will know.

We won't need somebody to persuade us or tell us we will know and we as Christian people will be welcoming of him when it happens. So don't worry about people who run around saying he's come already he's in Adelaide or some other place in the world they're wrong for when he comes we will know so don't be deceived or misled.

[ 23 : 05 ] Jesus I think doesn't answer the question about when because he wants to prepare his followers for tough times. The times before he comes will be tough for Christians and he wants Christians to endure to the end.

So he says in verse 13 but the one who endures to the end will be saved. That involves surviving tough times. It involves having Christian faith in the midst of war, famine, earthquake, persecution, martyrdom, betrayal, etc.

It's not easy being a Christian in this world. We I think have it relatively easy in this country, in this age. But there are plenty of pressures on people to give up Christian faith and many Christians fall away when the going gets tough.

So it's a challenge to us. Are we fair weather Christians who are in it for the good times but when times get tough we'll ease off in our enthusiasm about our faith.

Is our Christian faith strong? Is it robust enough to last for the long haul? Don't fall away, Jesus is saying. Don't succumb to the pressure.

[ 24 : 18 ] Have strong faith even in the midst of adversity. Jesus doesn't answer the question when because he's practical. Jesus is pastorally minded.

What's the point of knowing when if you don't endure to the end? You see Jesus is never a theorist for the sake of theory. Theory is important only if it influences our practice, our behaviour, our faith,

our living and believing.

So the key is not when but the key is practical faithful Christian living until he comes again. A couple of years ago when I was living in England I led a seminar on the Old Testament.

There were a group of people at that seminar not from my church who were very interested and very enthusiastic about the coming again of Jesus Christ and where and when it would occur. And in the question times throughout the day they badgered me with questions about when and where is Jesus coming again.

I got a bit sick of this at one time and said fairly flippantly although I'm sure it'll be true when I asked where will Jesus come again when I said the MCG. Sadly it wasn't last night.

[ 25 : 39 ] But I wondered afterwards oh if they only had the same interest in holy godly living until that end. I'm not saying they were necessarily unholy or ungodly people but our interest our concern our motivational focus ought to be on how we live not when Christ is coming.

That's the emphasis that Jesus is trying to instill in his followers here. But there's another reason why he doesn't say when also. He finishes in verse 14 this section and says and this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world as a testimony to all the nations and then the end will come.

You see there's a task to do. We're not to sit around meditating and pondering the date trying to fill up our diary but rather there's a task to do in the interim period.

The reason why Jesus has yet to return is because we the church have the task of evangelism, of sharing the gospel, our faith, with those who are not Christians and those who do not worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

Evangelism is not a scary word. It's not about extreme Christianity or about a cult or sect or group within Christian faith but rather the task for every Christian of every age of every church is to be involved in the sharing of the gospel of their faith in Jesus Christ with others.

[ 27 : 05 ] That is our task as a church, as Christian people until Jesus comes again and that's why he's delayed. That's why he's not yet come. To give opportunity for people who are not Christians to repent and come to Christian faith which they'll never do unless they hear the gospel from their friends who are Christians.

Jesus you see is saying here don't be sidetracked by peripheral issues or by esoteric concerns of dates. The key task is to be ready for his return and that involves sharing the gospel with others. We are in the end times but we're no more in the end times today than nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus first spoke these words to the disciples. All the signs that he's issued here they've occurred and they are still occurring.

They are typical of the end times. It could be that Jesus comes again today or it may yet be another 2,000 or even more years. But he is coming.

The fact that he's not yet come for 2,000 years ought not make us lose confidence that he is coming at all. For he is. And when he comes we will know it. And when he comes we will worship him.

[ 28 : 21 ] And when he comes this world will be brought to his judgment seat. For he'll come in glory not in the smelly damp dank aura of a manger.

He'll come with fanfare and trumpets on the clouds not in silence of a Bethlehem night. The question's not when he's coming but are we ready?

Are we holding on to our Christian faith to the end? Are we sharing the gospel with those who are not Christians? For as he says this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world as a testimony to all nations.

And then the end will come. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.