

Coming on the Clouds

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[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on December 7th 1997 The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker His sermon is entitled Coming on the Clouds and is from Matthew 24, verses 15-31 And you may like to turn to page 806 in the Pew Bibles Last week, this week and next week I'm preaching a little series through Matthew's Gospel, chapter 24 This is the season of Advent and traditionally the time of the church year when we think of Jesus' second coming And let us pray God, we thank you that Jesus is coming again and we pray that as we hear your word and reflect upon it that you may make us more ready to meet him when he comes in glory

We ask this for his sake Amen Several years ago I began to do the Saturday Age Cryptic Crossword in the days when it was only on a Saturday and I started very badly I remember the first week I got one answer right I was sharing a house with some friends and two of them did the Cryptic Crossword each week and they gradually enticed me into having a go We used to get two or three copies of it and then sit and sort of challenge each other Well the first start, the start was bad One word right And it took me two or three weeks before I got two or three words right But gradually over the course of some months as I learned the sort of techniques and the allusions and the references that the Cryptic Crossword writer made gradually they became a bit easier and eventually I got one or two completely right The technique was understanding the sorts of allusions and references in many of the clues Now for those of you who've ever read the Gospels there are probably many times when you realise that Jesus is speaking somewhat cryptically

And for many of us when we read his words we think what on earth is he talking about? To the audience of his day though his words though maybe somewhat cryptic were at least a bit clearer because they would have had a better understanding of the allusions and references that Jesus was making because for many of the things that he was talking about the Old Testament provides the background And that's the case today in the reading that was read for us from this part of Matthew chapter 24 Jesus is replying to the disciples two questions we saw last week They ask him when will Jerusalem be destroyed because Jesus had just spoken of that and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age Two questions When will Jerusalem be destroyed and what will be the sign of the end of the age and when Jesus returns And we saw last week that Jesus dampens down their enthusiasm for the end He talks about various signs that will happen but they won't be the signs immediately before the end so much as the signs that characterize the time leading up to the end for which Jesus post-resurrection period and we today live in

Now from verse 15 he turns his attention to the destruction of Jerusalem and he says to them So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel let the reader understand Well there's the cryptic sort of comment that he's making It's not too difficult because he does at least tell us the source of his comment He says from the book of Daniel So it's not completely bizarre but nonetheless for most of us who I guess are not all that familiar with the book of Daniel apart from the fact that he was thrown into a den of lions and survived What is this desolating sacrilege?

What's being spoken of here? Well Daniel refers to this desolating sacrilege a few times in his book The book of Daniel was about in part the things that happened to a man called Daniel in about 550 BC but they're also full of visions and predictions that Daniel was given by God anticipating things that would happen after his time and many of those were fulfilled about 160 years before Jesus was born Let me give you a little bit of a glimpse of what happened in that time In the 168 BC and thereabouts the man who ruled Palestine was a man with the extraordinary name of Antiochus Epiphanes IV Now none of us would ever call our child Antiochus Epiphanes but this is the fourth one so presumably three lots of parents had already called their children Antiochus Epiphanes Well if you're looking for a baby's name maybe you'd like to try that and see if you can start a trend in our modern times

[5 : 06] Antiochus Epiphanes was a bad man He ruled Palestine which was largely Jewish but himself was not totally Jewish and he had little sympathy with the Jews who were there and in 168 BC he took swine into the Jewish temple and sacrificed them Now if you know anything about Jews you know that pigs are not eaten by them nor touched by them they are totally unclean So to take swine into the temple and sacrifice them was an abomination to the Jews Not only that Antiochus Epiphanes took in pagan symbols into the temple and he made some of the temple runes into brothels He was a bad man as you can see and it was clear for the Jews of his day that this was what Daniel had been speaking about 400 years before The abomination or the desolating sacrilege was Antiochus Epiphanes the fourth's work Now at the time the Jews after a year or two revolted against him and they cleansed the temple and purged him and kicked them all these things out and so on

It was a time of great Jewish uprising and great Jewish zeal part of the zeal of the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus' own day had stemmed from that very time 168 or just after BC Most of the Jews of Jesus' day would have thought that Daniel's words were already fulfilled in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes the fourth But Jesus is saying here let the reader understand history repeats itself you will see again a desolating sacrilege in the temple itself Daniel's words may have been in one sense already fulfilled but they're actually pointing to something bigger worse even than what Antiochus Epiphanes the fourth did for the real fulfillment came within 40 years of Jesus' words The Romans besieged Jerusalem and after a four year siege the city and its temple was destroyed and in the immediate precursor to its destruction the Roman pagan symbols and the emperor's symbols were carried into the temple desolating it and desecrating it in Jewish eyes

Jesus is predicting the end of the Jewish temple but notice what he doesn't say he doesn't say when the disciples asked him when will this happen and he just says it will he's saying that it will be fulfillment of prophecy both by Daniel and reinforced by Jesus himself and when it happens it will be a sign of God's judgment on God's sinful people Jesus is more concerned with how his followers respond than when it will occur so the verses that follow verse 15 are not about when but about how do you respond to this event and when Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans that's not a time for Jesus' followers to stand up to fight to hold fast to cling to Jerusalem to cling to the temple but rather he says flee run for your lives get out of the place as quickly as you can flee so he says when these things happen in verse 15 then those in Judea which is the area surrounding Jerusalem in verse 16 must flee to the mountains the mountains were the safest place the mountains are fairly inaccessible for an army and certainly for chariots and so on so flee there you may remember the story of King David who was pursued by Saul

David's life was spared because he fled to the mountains of Judea very rugged mountains and there he was safe from Saul who was pursuing him so flee to the mountains he goes on in verse 17 to say that the one on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house our modern equivalent and topical for this week would be if your house is threatened by bushfire don't go in the house to get your possessions run for your lives in Jesus' day the housetops were usually flat people would work or do things on their housetops he's saying don't go back inside and get your possessions run some suggest maybe even running from housetop to housetop fleeing the city when the Roman army comes verse 18 another instance of what might happen the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat presumably the picture is somebody who had their thick coat which also doubled as a blanket at night they would have probably worn it in the cool of the morning to where they would work in the field and then put it to one side and then worked in the field when this woe comes on Jerusalem run don't go back to the side of the field and get your coat just run for your lives that shows how desperate it is because the coat was needed to keep warm at night and very cold nights in the hills and so on but run for your lives different type of warning in verses 19 and 20 woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days pray that your flight may not be in winter when the roads would become very muddy and boggy and it would be hard to flee quickly nor on a sabbath a sabbath day of course there were limitations on how far Jews could travel indeed it suggested that many gates would be shut preventing travel on the sabbath day this is not saying that if this were happening you just can't get away on a sabbath day but it's rather saying pray that you don't have to break the laws of God to spare your life when this sacrilege comes on Jerusalem and its temple

Jesus then goes on to say in verse 21 for at that time there will be great suffering such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now no and never will be one million Jews perished in the Roman siege of Jerusalem and its conqueror of the land in the 60s AD that's a huge number in the ancient world 97,000 were taken prisoner many of them back to Rome as a mark of Rome's triumph over the Jews they were paraded through Rome Jerusalem itself the capital was besieged for four years that's a long and massive siege you besiege a town in the ancient world and people are stuck inside eventually their food runs out and if you're lucky their water supply runs out for four years Jerusalem was besieged and many many Jews in Jerusalem died of famine or starvation in that time a Jewish historian tells us that some mothers killed their children cooked them and ate them in order to stay alive that's an awful thing to think about doubly awful for Jews who really would not normally do or contemplate anything like that that shows how desperate the Jewish situation was in 66 to 70 AD when Jerusalem was besieged the Jewish people were very zealous to hold on to their capital and to hold on to their lives some of you know the story of Masada a fortress down by the Dead Sea on the top of a huge mountain that's isolated from others this fort had been built there by

[12:40] Herod the Great in earlier days a thousand Jews fled there and they were besieged for a year in the desert there was enough water to keep them alive for three or four years even in the desert so well constructed was this fortress but if you know the story of Masada you know that after a year the Roman army eventually came and built a great big ramp up the side of it and began battering down the wall with a battering ram and the Jews recognized that they were about to perish and they committed mass suicide so that the Romans would not have the glory of victory in defeating them and killing them and today Israelites in the army of Israel go to Masada for an army camp and let Masada never happen again is the call of the Israelite army now I say all that to give you a picture of how desperate the Jewish situation was against Rome how totally demoralizing it was for Jews how steadfastly they clung on to Jerusalem to Masada to their lives great contrast to that

Jesus says to his followers when this happens flee run for your lives he says it because Jerusalem its temple is no longer of crucial importance for Christian people those who follow Christ and we know that many Christians heeded Jesus' words and when the siege began and the Roman armies came it seems that many Jews fled across the Jordan river to modern day Jordan to a town called Pella and established Christian community there the Romans eventually destroyed Jerusalem the siege was successful and so great did the Romans value their destruction of Jerusalem that they built an arch in the forum in Rome Titus' arch and there are still some inscriptions of Jewish defeat that's how highly they prized the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD for the Jews it was the end of their temple it was the end of their capital city it was the end of Jewish Old Testament religion it has never gone back to Old Testament

Judaism ever since despite all of that Jesus' comments in this verse are rather puzzling the distress of this time he says is greater than anything before it and anything after it we might think Jesus might be prone to exaggeration here because surely the holocaust of this century both the Armenian and the Jewish is worse than this and surely there have been worse atrocities in warfare committed all through the ages since then but I think what's happening here is that Jesus is seeing a bigger picture if you remember last week one of the difficulties of this chapter is that it moves from talking about the end of Jerusalem in 70 AD to the end of history when Jesus returns and though the two events are chronologically far far apart at least 2,000 years or nearly 2,000 years if not much more nonetheless the two events are related in Jesus' thinking for the first the destruction of Jerusalem is if you like a cameo of what the end of history will be like because it's

God's judgment against a sinful people it's a warning of what the final judgment is going to be like and if the distress of that time was great Jesus is saying it will be even greater when he returns and this world faces its judgment before the throne of Christ certainly at the time when Jerusalem fell in 70 AD there was a very heightened expectation of the end times there were four Roman emperors within a year when Nero died and then a quick succession of other Roman emperors the empire was somewhat unstable and many people expected the end of the world was nigh Jesus it seems is combining in his description of the absolute distress of the time a glimpse of what the end of history will be like if 70 AD was bad when Jesus returns again it may be even worse but Jesus is not wanting to scare his followers if you're like me your first reaction might be to think

I don't want to be alive when that happens I don't want to have to go through that sort of tribulation and trial but Jesus reassures his followers Christian people in verse 22 he says and if those days had not been cut short no one would be saved literally no one would survive but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short he's saying here that terrible though the destruction of Jerusalem is and terrible though it will be when Jesus returns and in the period leading up to that return all of that time in God's sovereignty is cut short for the sake of God's own people God is in control God is sovereign even in these times of turmoil and tribulation and it's for the sake of the elect Jesus says that God is cutting these days short the elect is a way of describing Christian people he could have said for Christians for the sake of Christians God will cut short this time but he says for the sake of the elect which I think is a very encouraging way of describing

[18 : 01] Christian people in such turmoil and distress because to call Christians the elect shows God's initiative and God's sovereignty for it is God who has chosen his people whether of Jewish or non-Jewish background Christians are God's elect chosen by God that means God has got his hand on us we are in God's care and you see our salvation or endurance of tribulation does not depend on us surviving and persevering as much as it depends on God who has got us in his care and in his control we ought to take comfort from the way Jesus describes Christians here as the elect because God has chosen us and he will not let us go he will not abandon those whom he has chosen so be assured if you're a person who's placed your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore are a Christian person God has chosen you and he holds you and he cares for you and protects you even in the midst of the distress of the times described here but that doesn't mean we just sit back and luxuriate in being in God's care we are called to act responsibly in particular

Jesus says don't be deceived or led astray by the things of this world so he says in verse 23 if anyone says to you look here is the Messiah or there he is do not believe it we might think well that's a puzzle because one day the Messiah will come and somebody might say there he is and they'll be right but no Jesus says that will never happen if anybody ever says there's the Messiah or here's the Messiah they're wrong don't believe it for false messiahs and false prophets will appear Jesus says as he said last week and produce great signs and omens even miracles so as to lead even the elect astray don't be deceived by somebody who claims to be the Messiah the Christ the Saviour or even great prophet of God and even if they support what they say by great miracles don't be deceived and don't be led astray take note Jesus says I've told you this beforehand in verse 25 he says some would say that the Messiah has come in the wilderness he goes on to say in verse 26 look he is in the wilderness many Jews expected the Messiah to come in the desert or the wilderness

Isaiah the prophet had said prepare in the wilderness a way for God make straight a path for God words that probably we know quite well they're repeated in Handel's Messiah words that are also repeated at the beginning of the gospels so many people expected the Messiah to come in the wilderness so when John the Baptist appeared before Jesus and was in the wilderness eating locusts and honey and so on people asked him are you the Messiah they expected he was because he appeared so oddly in the wilderness but no Jesus said if someone says the Messiah is out there in the wilderness don't believe them then he goes on in verse 26 27 to say sorry 26 look he's in the inner rooms do not believe it that is some Jews expected the Messiah to come secretly or in a hidden way in 1914 the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that the Messiah had come already secretly and had revealed himself only to the chosen special few who happened to be

Jehovah's Witnesses they're wrong sadly the stupidity of the sect continues to today nobody who says the Messiah is there in the wilderness or he's already come in some secret way none of those people is right they're wrong all of them for when Jesus does return we will know it we won't need somebody to point him out we won't read about it in the newspapers when Jesus returns we all will know it that's why anybody who says to you look there's the Messiah or here's the Messiah they're wrong because when the Messiah comes we won't need anybody to point him out we will see him all of us whether Christian or not we'll see the Messiah Lord Jesus when he returns to this earth so verse 27 says for as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west so will be the coming of the Son of Man sheet lightning racing across the sky very visible to everybody who sees it

Jesus is saying from east to west that is as the dimensions of this world when Jesus returns everybody will see and know he quotes a proverb to support his statement verse 28 wherever the corpse is there the vultures will gather that is if there's a corpse the vultures will make it obvious Jesus is saying when he returns it will be obvious no one need be deceived he goes on to describe what this day will be like when he returns in verse 29 the sun will be dark and the moon will not give its light the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of heaven will be shaken a fairly frightening picture words that come again from the Old Testament the style of writing is called apocalyptic writing it's sort of like poetry but in a bigger grander sort of more dramatic way but it doesn't necessarily mean everything is literally true as it's described this is like the background music in a film that sets the mood or sets the scene or the stage that's what this is saying as sort of clues that this is the end of history here it's like when we say this was an earth shattering event we don't mean the earth shattered because it's still in one piece and we're still on it and we're still living but we're using a metaphor if you like for describing a very significant event well that's what's happening here with this sort of language this is the end of history type event and Jesus is saying when then when all these things the stage is set if you like the mood is set the sign of the son of man will appear in heaven the disciples had asked for a sign and now Jesus says in verse 30 that the sign of the son of man will appear in heaven but what is it what's the sign that's what the disciples asked and yet again

[24 : 35] Jesus doesn't give them an answer that they want he doesn't tell them what the sign is but when we see it we will know that's the important thing the sign is not going to be given so that we can calculate when the end will be or work out what's going to happen or what date or time or place but when we see the sign we will know that it is the sign and the son of man is on his way and the people will mourn we're told in verse 30 which is a bit of an odd thing but this world which basically and by and large for 2000 years has ignored Jesus rejected him they will realize that they were wrong that Jesus is the Lord and when he comes they will mourn and bewail the fact that they were wrong and ignored him rejected him and despised him in every age it's not a statement of what will happen for Christian people but for those who are not Christians when Jesus returns they'll realize that they have in effect killed the son of God and here now they are faced with him coming in his glory what will Jesus do when he returns we're told in verse 31 that he'll 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 wherever we are in the world

God's angels will be sent by Jesus to gather us to him and take us home what a great picture it's not as though Jesus is going to arrive in some place like London or something and a message will come out you've got to get there but rather when Jesus comes we will see him we will know it and we will be gathered by his angels and taken there another great statement of the care of God that not one of God's people will be left aside or abandoned when Jesus returns all of us picked up and gathered by God's angels to be with Jesus and taken home to heaven forever what a great picture of hope for Christians especially in the face of the distress and tribulation described in this chapter and the angels will be heralded by a trumpet the instrument of the arrival of an important person when the Queen opens Parliament in Westminster the trumpets sound and she enters when Jesus returns the trumpets will sound the fanfare the arrival of the most important king the most important sovereign in world history but the trumpets are also the instrument used for victory and so when the trumpets sound when the angels come to gather

God's elect it's the victory sound the victory was won on the cross when Jesus died and then rose from the dead but this is the proclamation of that victory to the world for our world by and large ignores that victory considers it a loss and futile event but when the trumpets sound they'll realize and bewail the fact that the real victory is Christ's he is the king he is the Lord and he's coming in glory to bring his people to himself and all others before his judgment seat this cosmic upheaval that's described here ought not make us afraid or scared for those who are not Christians they will be terrified on that day but for those who've placed their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ it will be the day of victory and the day of homecoming gathered up to be with him forever don't be led astray don't give up your Christian faith don't yield to the temptations and delusions of this world don't give in to this world's thinking that Jesus is gone defeated and no more for he is coming back in glory this time not in the grief of the first in majesty this time not in the modesty of the first in splendor this time not in the squalor of the first at Bethlehem so well may we pray and pray with real eagerness and expectation come

Lord Jesus Amen Amen Thank you.