

Matthew 24:1-35

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[0:00] In this room, our ancient history, eschatology, that is the doctrine of the last things, was big business in America. Right? The Late Great, Planet Earth, books like that, or the Left Behind series, or my personal favorite, 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988.

And actually, not a joke, his prediction was September the 12th, the same date that I messaged the other else. I can't make it up. But historically, Americans love them some end times theology. And love for a particular flavor of that has, or one flavor or another, has led to less unity among the brethren than Christ would like us to have.

And so I have been looking ahead, and let the hearer understand, dreading this passage for five months. And if I've been looking at it for five months, I've got it all figured out, right?

And if I've been looking at it for five months, this sermon's going to be great, right? Yeah, thanks.

Thanks for the confidence. As I've studied this passage more and more, I am convinced that Jesus is not talking mostly about a post-millennial, or pre-tribulational, or amillennial, or post-tribulation, or I've never heard of any of those things, or I've never heard of any of those things, illennial, anything. Matthew 24 is not a lecture on the timelines. Jesus has a different concern.

[1:46] And we won't have to wait long to see it. He's going to introduce it very early in the passage. So whether you have closely held beliefs about the end times that look something like this, or something like this, this passage and this sermon are not chiefly about charts and timelines and symbols and reading the signs of the times.

Matthew 24 introduces us to Jesus, the pastor, who is caring for his flock, and it is for his people today.

So let us pray to him and ask that he would shepherd us, and I would shepherd as well as an under-shepherd, and that we would see his heart for us. Lord our God, in these moments will the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock, and our Redeemer.

Amen. This passage comes during Holy Week. Now, Christ's last week of his earthly ministry centered in Jerusalem and has centered specifically on the temple.

The triumphal entry at the beginning of Holy Week ends at the temple, and then Jesus cleanses the temple, chasing out the money changers and those who were selling.

[3:25] And then he silenced his opposition as they tried to discredit him in the temple courts. And he turned to the crowds, again in the temple courtyard, in chapter 23, and pronounced woes on religious hypocrisy.

And then we read Matthew 24, verse 1, Jesus left the temple and was going away. And his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.

Now the temple, we have a little picture of it here, was one of the great buildings of the ancient world. It was one of the largest buildings on the planet at the time, and it was clad all in white limestone and trimmed with gold, and it reflected sunlight like a beacon, the ancient accounts say. And so a group of fishermen from Galilee would have been in awe of something like this. They would have found it incredible. And the whole week that they were there, they were probably like, man, look at it. It dominated the skyline.

There really wasn't a skyline except for the temple. It's as if a farmer goes to New York City and sees skyscrapers, right? Should be amazed by them the whole trip.

[4:40] And the disciples probably weren't trying to start a conversation about some great tribulation. They were probably just saying, wow, look

at that, Jesus. Isn't that awesome? Isn't that cool?

Sharing their excitement with their leader. But, verse 2, Jesus answered them. He answered them? They weren't even asking a question. Anyway, 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. And so here, Jesus predicts the destruction of that temple.

It will be thrown down and utterly dismantled. Now, if in the year 2000, someone told you the World Trade Centers, right, some of the great buildings of the world will be thrown down and totally destroyed, you would be concerned, wouldn't you?

Such great buildings. In such an important city. What will happen to all the people of that city? And the temple, which was much more important to Israel's national consciousness than the Twin Towers ever were to the U.S.

[6:00] Well, Christ's reply here would cut them to the quick. And so, of course, they would say, verse 3, well, as He was on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately saying, tell us, when will all these things be?

And as they sense the severity of the sign here, what will be the sign of your coming at the end of the age? The disciples likely sensed that the fall of the temple was connected to the judgments that Jesus had just passed in chapter 23.

They probably connected the fall of the temple to the end of the world. Right? Think back, some of us in this room actually may not have been alive when the Twin Towers fell, which is crazy to me. I was a junior in high school. But, so like that was a formative thing in my life, right? Think back to how transformative that was to American culture.

And then realize that the temple was far more important to Israel than the Twin Towers were to us. Right? No building, not a single building, not even a group of buildings in the U.S.

[7:12] represent as much as the temple did for Israel. Right? If Al-Qaeda had hit the World Trade Center, the White House, the Capitol, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Pentagon, it still would not have had the national significance that the fall of the temple would have in Israel.

This was the place where the creator God made himself present in this world, called a unique people to himself and gave them their identity and promised a kingdom that would last forever. The fall of the temple would be a bigger deal than we can pretty much wrap our heads around. So the disciples want to know, when would that be? Now, is he going to answer them straight up? We've learned by now that he probably won't. Right? I have lost count of how many times in Matthew's Gospel I've said something like, is this what you would expect next? Like, is this the answer we would expect?

Is that what you would say? What I would say? No. Jesus, seemingly on every page we read, kind of turns things around and upside down. Well, the disciples ask, when will this cataclysm happen?

[8:27] And Jesus says, verse 4, see that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, I am the Christ, and they will lead many astray.

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed. For this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

They asked for a date. How does he answer? He doesn't give them a date. What does he give them?

What is his concern? He says, see that no one leads you astray. He says, see that you are not alarmed.

Remember when we said that this passage is not a doctrinal lecture about the chronology of the end times? Here, verse 4, we see Jesus explain what his chief concern is.

[9:45] What kind of language is that? Do not be led astray. Do not be alarmed. That's not the language of a prophet or of a lawgiver. That's not the language of a priest or a judge or a king.

This is the language of a pastor, of a shepherd, saying, little flock, do not be alarmed. Do not be dismayed. Do not be led astray.

Well, led astray by what? False Christs and prophets and wars and natural disasters, how would those things lead us astray?

When things seem out of control in your life, does it feel like God is in control? Or do you feel like you're being led astray?

When war and conflict rage geopolitically and in your own life, do you sense a peace that surpasses understanding?

[10:53] Or are you alarmed? When the world goes wrong, where do we look for stability? When our world is unstable, so too can be our faith.

And we might look for other bedrocks, other foundations, and go astray. We might lose hope, right? If the world is this way, how could God really permit this?

Right? And we could doubt even his very existence because of our circumstance. And so as we walk through this passage, we are hearing from Jesus the pastor who is telling us not to be dismayed, not to be alarmed, not to be led astray by the things of this world and the trials that we face.

We need to feel his warm regard towards us in this passage, his pastoral concern for us, his loving care. This is our good shepherd caring for his flock and reminding us what is most important.

And he's telling us in verse 8, all these are but the birth pains. Which is an interesting picture.

Right?

[12:18] War and natural disaster and false prophets, they are going to ebb and flow, he says, like birth pains. But he's saying these are the normal characteristics of this age.

And when I say this age, I mean that we live since Pentecost in what the scriptures call the last days.

Not necessarily in the sense that like he's coming next Tuesday. More on that next week if the Lord should tarry. But this age we live in after the earthly ministry of Christ, marked by the pains of conflict and falsehood and disasters, is the last age of this present world.

The scriptures attest in Acts chapter 2, just weeks after this conversation that Jesus is having in chapter 24, Acts chapter 2, Peter explained that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the church at the day of Pentecost marked the last days that the prophet Joel pointed to.

Hebrews chapter 1, long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son.

[13:41] In his first epistle, the apostle John said, children, it is the last hour. And so, they are not saying necessarily a chronology, a timeline thing, but what they are saying is that we are in the final age of this world.

And in these closing chapters of Matthew, we witness the last days of Christ's earthly ministry and he will come again to consummate his kingdom and renew heaven and earth.

And in the meantime, this age is pregnant, expecting, and with that come birth pains. So what should we expect in these last days that might lead us astray?

Well, friends, it's difficult. Look with me at verse 9. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake and then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another and many false prophets will arise and lead many astray and because of lawlessness and because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

And so in this section, Jesus narrows his views somewhat. He's still talking about these birth pains but instead of looking out there and saying the wars and the earthquakes and the natural disasters, he looks more narrowly as a pastor at our experience, the experience of his disciples and he's answering in advance.

[15:30] I love that, right? This question that we have, well, if Christ is risen, why doesn't it feel like we're victorious today? Why does it feel like things are wrong?

Well, he's preparing us and he says that persecution will actually be the norm for his church. Right? So friends, first, let's just be thankful that we live in an unusual place in time in this world where there is the peace that comes from the blessing of religious freedom.

Right? That is not the experience of every time period. That's not normal. And it's not the experience of all the Christians in the world today. Right? Let's pause and pray for a moment. Oh Lord, our God, we thank you for that. We thank you for the blessing of our current religious freedom. Lord, will you help us to not take it for granted? And Lord, we ask that our brothers and our sisters in Africa, in Southeast Asia, in China, who are hated and persecuted for trusting in Christ.

Lord, will you preserve them? Will you strengthen them? Will you keep them from being led astray thinking that you don't reign because of their circumstances when in fact you do?

[16:51] Lord, help them to not be alarmed and trust in Christ, their great pastor and shepherd. We pray that in his name. Amen. Friends, even if we are martyred, right, if we're persecuted, if we lose everything, if we are killed for loving Christ, it is fantastically, phenomenally, overwhelmingly worth it.

Better is one day in his courts than living a lifetime in the lifestyle of a king or a billionaire. so let us press on to the finish line. Which makes us think of verse 13 there where he says, the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Now that could sound a lot like a kind of a works-based religion, couldn't it? Right? You'll only enter the kingdom if you keep on producing a faithful life all the way to the end. That's not the gospel, is it?

What's going on here is this. Jesus told us back in the Sermon on the Mount that there will be many who make false professions of faith in him.

[18:17] Well, persecution is one of those things that drives away false converts, right? It exposes them. If you want to see more about that, look back to chapter 13 where he talks about the parable of the sower.

Instead, what Jesus is talking about here is that the scriptures attest that he who began a good work in you will complete it.

The one whom Jesus has bought by his blood, the one whom the Father has adopted, the one in whom the Holy Spirit has birthed new life and has personally indwelt, our Lord will not abandon us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He will carry us through to the end. That is the glorious doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

For all who have repented and believed and found life in his name, he will carry us through to the end, to victory, to his victory.

[19:29] And he will give us strength to weather the storms, wars, and persecutions, and disasters. He will carry us through. And so we see here again, Jesus, the pastor, shepherding his flock.

Do not be led astray. Do not be alarmed. Do not let your love grow cold. When you see throughout these last days conflict, personal and political.

When you see disasters, natural and familial. When you see false prophets, even the sharpest birth pains. Specifically here we're about to see the one that they asked about, the sharp birth pains of the fall of the temple.

Jesus is a true pastor, friends. These are exactly the kinds of things that alarm us, right? These are exactly the kinds of things that would cause us to look for answers and in our desperation be led astray by false teachers.

When nations go to war and the earth quakes, when famine strikes, we fear for our very lives. We're tempted to doubt God's goodness. How can God be in charge when all the nations are going to war?

[20:49] How can God be in charge when false teachers have enormous platforms? How can we remain strong in our faith when our culture embraces every form of debauchery and call Christians hateful for denying that?

How can we find our joy in Christ when our families disown us for faith in Christ? My wife was having a conversation with someone this week who was counting the cost about what it would look like for her losing family over choosing Christ?

If Christ is risen, first, if he has vanquished our sin, if he has conquered the enemy on his cross, if he has defeated death in the grave, and if he rules and reigns now, well, how could it be like this?

Jesus, the good pastor, is preparing us ahead of time. Do not be alarmed. And so even when there is cataclysm, the fall even of Jerusalem and the temple, God still reigns, so do not lose heart. He promises, friends, that he will come. So do not be alarmed, do not be led astray. This is all in God's hands. But not only does he prepare us for hardship, verse 14, he prepares us for mission. [22:21] We need to be careful not to be led astray from the mission as well. Verse 14, he says, 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.

So on the one hand, do not be alarmed, do not be led astray, instead, proclaim the gospel to the whole world. Friends, the church exists to make disciples of all nations.

And Jesus says here that the kingdom will advance. The gospel will go out. His mission will be a success, even in the midst of trial and strife and tribulation.

Right? So friends, let's share the good news of Jesus Christ with boldness. He has assured us of its success. Share it in whatever circumstances the Lord has placed you with boldness, right?

In your workplace, with your children, among your peers, at the park, right? Wherever the Lord has set you this day, do not be afraid.

[23:35] Do not be alarmed, do not be led astray. His mission will continue. He will see it through. And consider that He may be calling you to something more.

Right? Sitting here today, right here, or next door among our children, might be missionaries who will go and proclaim Christ where He has not yet been named.

We need not be dissuaded or shocked or disheartened in the mission, even as the birth pains continue.

The mission and the pains, well, they're simultaneous, and one will win out Christ's mission. So we need not be alarmed. And here, Jesus is going to again, verse 15, zoom in even further on the birth pains.

And He's actually going to answer now the disciples' question about the fall of the temple. I like how one commentator put it, he said, this is maybe the sharpest of the birth pains in their lifetime.

[24:40] Verse 15, 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 in 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 the winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, which has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. What's he talking about?

The abomination of desolation from the prophet Daniel, which is a reference to Daniel chapter 9 and chapter 12, refers to the desecration and the destruction of the temple that Jesus has already prophesied in verse 2.

And that is exactly what happened. Israel revolted against Roman rule in 66-67 AD, and Rome crushed them and extinguished basically the nation of Israel.

[25:50] It took three years, but by the time it was all over, Jerusalem fell in AD 70, when the temple was desecrated and then leveled. And today a mosque stands in its place.

But Jesus is not here chiefly concerned with a building or with a timeline. He's not giving us an info dump about the date of the event.

Jesus is still being a pastor here. Look, he tells them that when Judea comes into attack, protect yourselves. Flee the destruction of the Roman armies.

His people's lives are precious to him. Now, he may call you to give your life in service to the Great Commission, to die a martyr's death in the missionary task, but he does not call us to needlessly throw away our lives in the path of an invading army because he loves us.

We are precious to Jesus, our pastor and our Savior. And he laments. Jesus, the pastor, laments for the hardships his people will face.

[27:01] He says, alas for the women who are pregnant in that day. And he charges them to lean on the Lord. He says, pray that your flight may not

be in winter.

And then in verse 22, Jesus zooms back out again to these last days, this whole scope of these last days, and gives us two things to hold on to.

Verse 22, he says that the birth pangs will end. And so he will return to the theme of verses 4 through 13 and say, do not be led astray. He says, verse 22, and if those days, that is the days of these last times, had not been cut short, no human being would be saved.

But for the sake of the elect, those days will be cut short. And if anyone says to you, look, here he is, 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.

See, I have told you beforehand. What a great pastor. 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.

[28:17] 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. And so Jesus is still pastoring his flock.

Verse 25, right? See, I have told you beforehand. He's preparing us. It will not take us by surprise. It will not alarm us. We will not be naive and easily led astray when trial and troubles come.

And he's preparing us for more, right? Verses 22 to 24 for the birth pains. He's also preparing us for the day when they are cut short. Jesus tells us that those days, the period of the birth pains, will be cut short.

And guess what? He's coming back. The Son of Man, Jesus himself, will return. Even if the difficulties today look unbearable, even if it feels, even if it is the greatest calamity this world has ever known, friends, the Son of Man is coming.

He is coming on the clouds of heaven. He is coming with his angels. He is coming in power and in glory. He is coming for his people.

[29:39] Which means the birth pains, our troubles, will end. Our sorrows will cease because our King is coming.

Political upheavals will not stop him. This upcoming presidential election will not determine his plans. Natural disasters, the breaking of the very earth will not destabilize his purpose.

False teachers lead people astray. They pervert the truth, but they will not change the truth. And so we will not lose heart. We will not be led astray.

We can continue the mission. We can worship God and live obedient lives of faith and make disciples of all nations and proclaim and build and serve with confidence.

Even if they kill us, the birth pains will not undo us because he reigns over all and he will return.

[30:52] And about that return, he says we won't have to guess about it. Right? We won't have to wonder about it. As vultures point to a corpse, as lightning lights up the entire sky, there will be no mistaking the second coming of the Son of Man.

When he returns, no one will have to tell you. You'll know. And what will happen then? He tells us in verse 29. 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. And immediately after the tribulation ends, this age ends.

At the end of these last days, the age of the birth pains, the Lord Jesus will return in glory. Now, whether we understand verse 29 there, these cosmic signs to be a physical phenomenon or symbols of something else, what we understand here is that the world will be shaken and it will be changed.

[32:32] And he will gather his people. And the nations, those who do not belong to his kingdom, verse 30, they will mourn because on that day he will come in judgment for all who are not found in Christ, which spurs us on to mission.

But again, verse 23, his focus isn't on judgment. Sorry, verse 31. Jesus returns to the topic of his people.

That is his heart. That's his focus. It's on his people. The eyes of the Lord are set upon his people. His delight is in them.

Last week he lamented about how he wanted to gather Jerusalem to himself as a mother hen would gather her chicks. Well, guess what?

On that day, with wonderful affection, he will draw to himself every man, woman, and child who has trusted in him.

[33:39] And Jesus says, verse 32, that the disciples are entering into that season. He says, 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, verse 34, truly, I say to you, this generation, the generation he was speaking to then, will not pass away until all these things take place.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. And so friends, these things that he has been speaking about, entering into the last days of the birth pains, of this broken and sinful world, verse 34, he said that that generation there would enter into it.

That's the answer to the disciples' questions, finally. Right, the Bible often calls a generation 40 years. And the temple fell about 37 years after Jesus spoke these words.

And the other signs and birth pains that Jesus spoke about, well, those birth pains all began. They entered into this age of the birth pains in that generation. which means his word is true, friends.

[35:03] It bears out. And he attests, verse 35, that all the rest of his words will certainly come true too. Right, the birth pains have come as he has promised.

And the mission has gone forth as he has promised. And the temple did fall as he promised. And his warnings, verse 25, have been a preparation for us as he promised, which means that his promise in this passage to sustain us to the end.

Verse 13. To return for us, right here, will also come to pass. He has proven himself true to his word, just as he promised.

Friends, look to Matthew 24, and in all these things, see Jesus, our pastor, our good shepherd, preparing us.

Hear him shepherding his people, us, his flock. He prepares us for the hardships to come so that we are not alarmed. He tells us to be wary of false Christs and false teachers so that we are not led astray.

[36:28] He tells us to flee from unnecessary harm. What a good pastor. He reminds us that he who began a good work in us will complete it. He tells us to lean on the Lord in prayer.

He shows us his affection for us, and he guarantees the success of our mission. The gospel will be proclaimed to all nations so we may boldly walk into it.

And he guarantees, friends, the birth pains will be cut short. And he guarantees that he is coming for us.

So let's pray to him. Christ, our King and our Good Shepherd, thank you that you have pastored us and prepared us ahead of time.

Lord, in this age of birth pains, every trial and tribulation and grief and loss and suffering, I pray that you would help us to not be alarmed, to not be led astray by the circumstances we face, but to remember that you rule and you reign, that the grave is empty and that you are coming for us, your people.

[37:48] Lord, will you confirm in our hearts today that you are our Good Shepherd and that you will complete in us, that you will carry us through to the end so that we will not be put to shame, but will find and for lasting joy in our King, Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.