

Matthew 24:1-35

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[0 : 00] Hello, my name's Aaron. If you haven't met me, I'm the minister for this service. I'd love to meet you afterwards. If you're brand new, come and say hi. So we have another tricky passage this week.

So let me start at sort of about 40,000 feet. Unlike other world religions, Christianity does not believe that history is cyclical, like in, say, the Hindu faith.

Nor do we think that the world will just sort of slowly sort of fade out. No, Christians believe that a story is being played out. And that the world will come to an end and Christ will return and destroy evil and make all things new.

And it's going to be wonderful, unimaginably wonderful. And our passage tonight prophetically talks about this. Now, some branches of the Christian church worldwide, or some members of the Christian family, love to talk about this kind of thing.

And unfortunately, sometimes Christians will say ridiculous things as they relate to what we're talking about here.

[1 : 13] And because of that, I think we can be made to be sort of like a little bit suspicious of things like prophecy or end times.

But when we read our passage, it's very interesting to me to see that Jesus was as suspicious of end time preachers as we are. In fact, more so. Now with that, let's get into the detail of it.

We'll start at verse one. So the story starts with Jesus. He's leaving the temple. And if you remember from last week's passage, he's just been rebuking these religious leaders in the temple. And he's rebuking them for their hypocrisy and corruption. So in verse one, when it says Jesus left the temple, it's not just sort of giving us some idea of, you know, Jesus' location, right?

It's Jesus is leaving the temple. He's not just going off to get a bite to eat, you know, like he's leaving the temple. Jesus is saying that whole thing, that whole thing there, that whole system's finished.

[2 : 29] Still in verse one. The disciples now, they point out to Jesus, wow, how about that temple?

Because it would have been, you know, architecturally an incredibly impressive building. It would have dominated the landscape. It was, you know, polished limestone and gold leaf.

And it would have been incredibly impressive. And they point that out to Jesus. And as I said, Jesus has just been tearing into the Pharisees in the temple.

So we don't know why the disciples did this. Maybe they were trying to lighten the mood. You know, maybe they were going like, so, you know, how about that temple? Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, cool, you know.

Or maybe they were just clueless. We don't really know. But Jesus' response is quite unexpected to their words. It's quite shocking what he says. He answers them and he says, see all those stones?

[3 : 30] See that whole place? Truly I say to you, there will not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. Saying the temple is going to be destroyed.

This building that you guys thought was really cool, it's coming down. This is a really serious thing for him to say. In fact, these words were used later on when he was on trial to convict him.

And when he was on the cross to mock him, they brought these words up again. But as you know, if you know anything about ancient Near Eastern history, Jesus was right. Forty years later, the temple was destroyed.

The Romans lay siege to Jerusalem in response to a Jewish revolt and tore the place apart. Now back to the text. So Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple, the center of Jewish life back then.

And as you expect, the disciples, because that just sounded crazy, right? That sounded crazy to them. So understandably, they had some questions about this.

[4 : 39] And they say, well, tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? So when's the end of the world?

And when's the temple thing going to happen? And what are the signs that we should look out for? Quite reasonable questions. Okay. I really need you to stay with me right here for just two minutes. If you've tuned out, tune back in again. This is where the passage gets really tricky, right? Here's what's tricky about it. In the passage, Jesus is sometimes talking about the temple coming down, being destroyed.

And sometimes he's talking about the end of the world. And it can be hard to know which one of these things he's talking about. And so when we take that, what we're left with is this.

The temple is like a prototype to the world's end. We could say like this. In the passage, there are these two horizons, these double horizons.

[5 : 46] The end of the temple, destruction of the temple, which would have seemed like the end of the world to the Jews. And then the actual end of the world. And Jesus talks fluidly, sort of fluidly moves in between both of these things, talking about them.

It's a bit tricky. But the key, though, is this. Either way, the application Jesus makes applies to both. Okay. Tricky.

Stay with me. It'll make sense as we go along. Okay. So back to the disciples' questions. When's this going to happen? And what signs should we look out for? And Jesus, you see, doesn't answer that question.

He doesn't say, well, you should, you know, watch out for this. And, you know, when the Americans' 7th naval sort of thing moves into the Pacific, you know, like he doesn't say stuff like that.

He says signs. I'm not going to give you signs. Let me tell you what are not signs. That's what he says. Let me tell you what are not signs.

[6 : 46] So instead of giving signs, Jesus gives anti-signs. And he tells us to watch out for people who claim to be able to read the signs. Okay.

So the anti-signs are verses 6 and 7. Here's what Jesus says. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars and nations will rise against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms and there'll be famines and earthquakes in various places.

These are not signs of the end, Jesus says. I mean, it just sounds like the world, doesn't it? Jesus is just telling us what's happened in the last 2,000 years.

But despite what Jesus says, that these things are not signs and we shouldn't read them like signs, despite that, there are Christians who want to read them like signs, who love this stuff.

The Bible teaches, when it teaches about the end times, when you take all the information into account, the end times started at the ascension of Christ after the resurrection.

[8 : 00] We've been in them for a couple of thousand years. We're still in them right now. This is just what the world looks like. So we don't actually try and parse out world events like tele-evangelists do, looking for clues.

We've just been in these for the last couple of thousand years. The last historic event that the Bible is really clear on that will happen before Christ returns is the destruction of the temple. And that happened nearly 2,000 years ago.

So the phase we're in now, in verse 8, is described as the beginnings of birth pangs, which is like, if you've had kids, it's like the Braxton Hicks contractions, right?

Kind of the fake contractions. And there can be a long time between those and holding a baby in your arms. So the disciples ask for signs.

They want the power to sort of predict the end. But Jesus is not trying to make us seers, you know. What's he trying to do?

[9 : 07] When we read the rest of it, we'll see he's trying to make us long-distance runners. He's not trying to make us seers. He's trying to make us long-distance runners. And we'll see that in the passage. He gives us anti-science.

It's not that, it's not that, it's not that, it's not that. He says, but in the midst of all that, that, that, that, and that, let me tell you how to live. Let me tell you how to be Christians in the midst of this crazy world.

So, what does Jesus tell us about how to live in these times? He says lots of things.

I'll give you just a couple. First, verse 4, he says, don't be led astray. The world is going to be crazy.

Don't be led astray. There are going to be people who say they're the Christ. In verse 24, there will be false prophets who will do quite impressive things. And they will be sort of Christian-y.

[10:07] And many, Jesus says, will be led astray into weird forms of Christianity. The truth is, not everyone, not every leader who opens up the Bible deals honestly with its content.

And the results of that can be quite disastrous. And these are the kind of things that Jesus warns us about. So, there's a million examples.

A very, one, the most recent one that I just sort of read about was a pastor in Tanzania who's been drawing these huge crowds and promising just prosperity, you know, financial prosperity and total health and stuff.

If you let him anoint you with this extra special, he had this extra special blessing oil that he had. And so, in his service last week, he said, come to the front.

Everyone, come to the front. Come to the front. And there was a stampede and 20 people died, including, you know, five children. And he tried to skip the country and he was arrested at the airport. This is a perversion of Christianity, of course.

[11:26] I hope you know that. A perversion exported from America to Africa. And in the West, there's still a really strong strain of this kind of nonsense.

A kind of Christianity that promises that you can escape from the problems of the world, which is the opposite of what Jesus says here. So, like a Western example of this would be Paula White. So, Paula White, I don't know if anyone's ever heard of Paula White, but she says just crazy stuff. You know, in a monk saying stuff that's totally true, she says crazy stuff as well.

For example, she says Jesus is not the only begotten Son of God, just the first, and that all humans are divine and we have the power to speak worlds into existence. And then when you start getting onto the money stuff, which invariably gets to the money stuff, she says this, and I'm quoting her now.

She says, tell yourself. She's just saying, here are some things I want you to tell yourself. Tell yourself, I am going to activate my miracle by my obedience right now.

[12:33] I'm going to get up and go to the phone. And when you do that, she says, you put a demand on the anointing. I don't know what these things mean, but like, you put a demand on the anointing.

You're going to make God get off his throne. Like, come on, you know. Don't miss this moment. If you miss your moment, you miss your miracle. When Jesus raised Lazarus, according to the old King James Version, I'm still quoting her, his face was bound with a napkin.

It's taken from John 11:44. So everyone who sends \$1,144, do you guys get that? Right? White says she will send a napkin she has blessed.

Okay. Okay. So, this is not correct. All right? I went to a very good theological college, and I can tell you this is not right.

Now, you think, we're laughing because it's so ludicrous. Like, who would believe this stuff? Like, who believes this crazy stuff? Thousands of people believe this.

[13:50] Thousands of Christians in the world believe this stuff. And what is the scariest thing? Now, you might think, Aaron, you just went on the internet and tried to find the craziest Christian you could find, right?

No, I did not. Here's what's particularly dangerous about Paula White. She's the spiritual advisor to Donald Trump. She's one of Trump's.

Right? I agree with you, Lawrence. She's a pastor to Donald Trump. I didn't pick some just, you know, random, the craziest person I could find.

Folks, there are charlatans around. There is lots of falsehood out there. We must be watchful. We must care for each other's spiritual health. We must watch out for each other when we feel like we're starting to think crazy stuff.

How do we be watchful? Well, primarily, we need to be people that love the truth. We need to love the truth, which is why small groups are so important, which is why this catechism, catechism, go to catechism.

[14:59] It's why that stuff's so important. How else does Jesus encourage us to live? First, he says, don't be led astray by this stuff, which is really prevalent in North America and Africa.

Second, he says, don't abandon your faith. Verses 9 to 11. Folks, there is no one as bitter as a bitter ex-evangelical Christian.

You know, sometimes our Christian faith, it bumps up against culture. It bumps hard up against predominant culture. And it can be tempting sometimes for us to distance ourselves from our faith because we don't want the hassle.

Even when we don't face really serious persecution in our life like this, we can be tempted to think, you know what, this is what I'm supposed to believe, but this is what predominant culture believes. And if I say this stuff, I could be mocked or socially sidelined. And we can be tempted to stay quiet about Jesus. And folks, if you stay quiet about Jesus, if you stop loving him publicly, that will bleed privately and you'll stop loving him privately.

[16:21] And your heart can grow cold towards him. And Jesus says to these people, he says, stick with it. Stick with it and endure.

Remember verse 35, the last verse here. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. So all the other things that we put our trust into when we go cold on Jesus, we go hot on something else.

Because the hole in our hearts got to be filled with something, right? So we stop loving Jesus, we'll start to love something else, we'll grab a hold of something else. And Jesus is saying, that thing that you're pinning all your hopes on, that thing will pass away.

But my words, me, my words will stick around, will be forever. So following Jesus can be costly. He is not calling you to your best life now. It can be costly.

You will have periods of great ease and joy and it's going to be brilliant. And other times it will be quite difficult. But don't give up. It's worth it. Because you're hanging on to the only solid thing in the universe.

[17:27] Okay, big picture again for a moment. Because I know this is a tricky passage. Big, big, big picture again. The disciples say, what are the signs of the end?

And Jesus says, I'm not giving you signs. Let me tell you all this stuff that's not signs. Because he is not going to give us supernatural knowledge of future events.

He wants to give us endurance. He wants to give us endurance for this world and for the future. And he's doing this because he loves us. He wants us to persevere because he loves us.

Now just a caveat here. All this talk about Christianity being really difficult. That doesn't mean we seek out punishment. It doesn't mean we seek out the most painful thing we can do in our life.

Look at this little middle section here, which feels very sort of provincial, doesn't it? Verse 15 to 20, this abomination of desolation. If you have questions about that, you can ask me afterwards.

[18:26] So when you see the abomination of desolation, so this is talking about the temple part. This is talking about the temple being destroyed now. Flee to the mountains.

Let the one who's on the house stop. Don't go down into the house. Let the ones on the field, don't go back and grab your jacket. And for women who are pregnant and nursing, that's hard. Pray that this doesn't go down in winter.

So he's talking about the temple destruction in 70 AD where the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem. It was a terrible, terrible business. And here Jesus says, if you see it coming, you see the troops coming, don't be like, you know, Christianity is all about just pain.

I'm just going to welcome it, welcome it. He says, no, get out of there. Like, just go. Flee. Don't collect your family album or your treasure's downstairs.

Just get out of there. And pray it doesn't happen when you're at a really difficult phase in your life. We don't pray for pain in our life. We pray for wisdom. We pray for endurance. Okay, before we finish here, just a minute to go.

[19:27] So Jesus has given us these anti-signs. War, famine, distress, nation against nations. These are not signs I am returning. These are birth pangs. It could be a long ways out.

So how will we know when Christ returns? There are a couple of big-name Christian broadcasters, this is a true story, who have purchased property in Jerusalem.

And they have Jerusalem, they have a webcam pointed straight at the Mount of Olives, which is where Jesus is preaching right now, this is true, and so that they don't miss when Christ returns.

It's called the Messiah cam, if you want to look it up. Is that necessary? Do we think?

Like, you know, genuine question. Is that necessary? Well, the answer is in verse 29 to 31, and we'll finish with this. The sun will be darkened. And again, I'm not trying to make fun of these people.

[20 : 28] I don't think these people are charlatans. I just think they're really, like, misinformed. They're just not reading the Bible well. They're enamored by this idea of the end time stuff, and they're so caught up in that, they've kind of lost the plot, right?

I'm not trying to make fun of them. I'm just saying they're not reading the Bible well. Verses 29 to 31 here. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven 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, which is the loudest thing they knew in those days. It was the loudest thing they knew of. And they will gather his elect from the four winds and from the end of heaven to the other.

So what do we learn? Christ's return will be unmistakable, and it will be universal. And those who are his, he will gather us up like a hen gathers its chicks under its wing.

[21 : 33] And it will be terrible for some, and for us, unimaginable joy. But until then, Christ says, endure.

Persevere. And that's what we do. We persevere. We keep going. Amen.