

WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT THE LAST DAYS?

MATTHEW 24:1-35

We're in the midst of a series of messages about the last days which, of course, includes the whole subject of Jesus' second coming. Dr. George Sweeting, former President of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, tells of the day he noticed an unusual combination of bumper stickers on the car of a man who was visiting the school. The message conveyed by the two stickers prompted Dr. Sweeting to suggest to the unsuspecting visitor that he might want to remove at least one of them. One read: JESUS IS COMING! and the other: ESCAPE TO WISCONSIN. I'm sure Wisconsin is a great place, but I'm not sure it will provide safety for anyone when Jesus returns!

If our subject is the last days and eschatology is the study of the last days, as disciples of Jesus, we would naturally want to ask the questions, "Did Jesus say anything about the last days? What did He believe and teach about the last days?" Well, except for the book of Revelation, there's probably no more important section of the Bible on the subject of eschatology than Matthew 24. It's sometimes called the Olivet Discourse by Bible scholars because Jesus said what He said sitting on the Mount of Olives just outside the city of Jerusalem. Most Christians believe that the entire chapter records what Jesus believed about the last days. I will challenge that viewpoint this morning. I believe only a portion of what Jesus says here is about events yet to come in the future. This is a kind of two part message. I really hope all of you will come back next Sunday, because in a sense we are going to pick up next week where we leave off this week when we think more about what Jesus Himself believed and taught about His own second coming. But let's get at today's subject by reading our passage. If there was ever a worship service to keep your Bible open and accessible, today is that day! Now, whenever we want to understand any passage of the Bible, it's important to take a step back and ask ourselves some questions about the context in which something was said or written. So, first of all, then, let's...

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT.

Jesus says these things in the last week of His life. This was after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem – what we often associate with Palm Sunday – and before His death on the cross and resurrection. If we go back into the previous chapter – chapter 23 – we see Jesus really coming down hard on the Jewish religious leaders because of their unbelief, hypocrisy, and hatred of Him. His words are scathing. That sort of comes to a climax there in the end of chapter 23, when Jesus says the following in v. 37-39. Would you agree there's a very ominous finality in Jesus' words?

Then, chapter 24 begins with Jesus leaving the temple in Jerusalem, the disciples asking Him to admire the temple buildings, and Jesus providing a very troubling, unthinkable prophecy. This temple was going to be destroyed – absolutely leveled to the ground. The disciples then ask Jesus a two part question, "'Tell us,' they said, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" (Mt 24:3 NIV) Now, the disciples probably believed that whenever the temple was going to be destroyed it would happen simultaneously with Jesus' 2nd coming or

return from Heaven and the end of human history. They probably believed the temple was as permanent as the world itself. If the temple was destroyed, surely it also meant the end of human history. But, I believe that Jesus corrects their mistaken assumptions. No, these two events will not happen at the same time. The destruction of the temple was going to happen in their lifetime. Jesus is going to tell them a whole lot more about that in v. 4-35. But Jesus second coming and the end of human history was something very different. I believe Jesus addressed that future event – His second coming - in 24:36-50. More about that next week. Please come back! Secondly, let's...

UNDERSTAND THE INTERPRETATIVE CHOICES.

We're looking at one of those passages in the Bible that people with a very high view of Scripture interpret very differently. When I discussed the Millennium a few weeks ago – what it is and when it is – I suggested that there are topics in the Bible upon which followers of Jesus who have a high view of the Bible – it's inspired by the Holy Spirit and it has authority over our lives – can disagree. That's also true of some passages in the Bible, and Matthew 24 is a prime example. Just about everybody agrees that when you get to v. 36, Jesus is talking about His second coming which is still in the future. It's in v. 4-35 that you find very different interpretations. Please understand that whatever position you conclude is the best one, in the immortal words of Ricky Ricardo of the old *Love Lucy* sitcom, "You've got some 'splaining to do!"

Some believe everything in these verses is going to happen in the future. This is the view of dispensational premillennialism which I said a few weeks ago has been the dominant eschatological perspective of most evangelical leaders, churches and laypeople for the past 50-100 years. For instance, when Jesus talks about a time of "great distress" or "great tribulation" in v. 21, they believe it refers to a 7 year period of time of great turmoil here on Earth between the rapture of all Christians and the second coming of Jesus. They believe "the abomination that causes desolation" that Jesus mentions in v. 15 is something horrible and blasphemous that a future Antichrist will do in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. They assume a third temple will have to be built, because there is no temple in Jerusalem at the current time. The first Jewish temple was destroyed back in 587 BC and the second temple was destroyed about 40 years after Jesus went back to Heaven. By the way, not one verse in the New Testament predicts the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem a third time. And, even though Jesus says in v. 34, that "this generation" would see what He was talking about, they don't believe Jesus was talking about the people He was speaking to at that moment. Some suggest that the word "generation" there can be translated "race" meaning that Jesus implied that the Jewish race will not pass away until all of what Jesus predicts will happen. Most Bible scholars don't find that suggestion very credible. After all, the word occurs 27 times in the four Gospels and never once means "race."

A second interpretative choice is to believe that in v. 4-35 Jesus is talking about an event that was future for Him but past for us (the destruction of the temple in 70 AD) and also an event that is future for everybody – His second coming. I believe this is where a different group of premillennialists would probably land – the historic

premillennialists. They would argue that the time between Jesus' first coming and His return in great glory will be characterized by what Jesus mentions here: messianic pretenders, false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution of Christians, lack of love among believers, and the worldwide proclamation of gospel.

A third perspective is the one I personally believe. I believe in v. 4-35 Jesus is talking about something that was future for Him but is now past for us. To be more specific, I believe He predicted with supernatural clarity the conditions in first century Israel leading up to and including the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and of the temple in 70 AD – an historical event of great magnitude that happened about 40 years after He spoke these words. There are several reasons why I believe this is the best interpretative choice, but let me mention just three specifically. The most compelling reason is what Jesus says right there in v. 34, “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” (NIV) I see no reason to explain away the fact that by using the phrase “this generation” Jesus was speaking to and about the people living at the same time as Him at that moment. If Jesus wanted to identify a future or different generation, a more likely phrase would have been “that generation.”

A second reason is the overwhelming use of the pronoun “you” throughout these verses. “Watch out that no one deceives you.... You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed.... Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.... So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation’... Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.... At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it.... See, I have told you ahead of time.... So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.... Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.... Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” The most natural understanding of Jesus’s use of that word “you” is that He’s speaking directly to the people standing right there listening to Him not to some future, unknown group of people. Jesus uses that word “you” almost as frequently back in chapter 23 to denounce the Jewish religious leaders and He even says to them, “I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.” (Mt. 23:36 NIV) No one I know of has suggested that Jesus was referring to any other group but the religious leaders standing right there in front of Him when He spoke those words. A third reason for believing v. 4-35 is about something future for Jesus but past for us is the fact that all Jesus predicts here in these verses was completely fulfilled in and by actual historical events in the first century. So, let me talk to you about ...

UNDERSTANDING WHAT JESUS SAID AS ALREADY FULFILLED.

In v. 4-14, Jesus tells us about events that characterized the entire period of some 40 years – from about 33 AD when He ascended back to Heaven and 70 AD when both the city of Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Roman army. He says that religious impostors and messianic pretenders would flourish. That happened frequently

in the first century. Jesus says military conflicts would abound and there were many military disturbances between 33 - 70 AD. He predicted political turmoil and there was plenty of that. He predicted natural disasters such as famines and earthquakes and those have been documented by sources outside of the Bible during those years. He mentioned persecution and martyrdom which Christians began to endure in the 50s and 60s of the first century. He implies that there will be problems among the first Christians – lack of love and false prophets. All you have to do is read the New Testament epistles to recall the truth of what Jesus predicted.

Now, one thing Jesus does says here might be hard to interpret as past. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Mt. 24:14 NIV) Surely, that wasn’t fulfilled in the first century! That must be about the future, right? Not necessarily. When we read elsewhere in the Bible that “... in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth” (Lk 2:1 NASB) Luke is not implying that Augustus wanted to count all the Chinese or native Americans living at that time, too! No, it meant the then known world of the countries under Roman rule. Or, when Paul writes to the Christians in Rome and says, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Rom 1:8 NASB), he’s not implying the entire, literal planet we all Earth. The good news of Jesus did spread rapidly from 33-70 AD and people in all the nations under Roman rule had heard of it by then. Jesus simply predicted that His message would reach the entire Greco-Roman world before the temple’s destruction and that, in fact, happened.

In 15-28, Jesus tells us about one sign that would point unequivocally to the coming destruction of the temple. He called it “the abomination that causes desolation.” What is that about? That phrase first showed up in the Old Testament prophecy of Daniel written some 600 years before Jesus. Here’s one example, “His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.” (Dan 11:31 NIV) Most Bible scholars agree that Daniel’s prophecy was at least partially fulfilled in the demonic rule of a foreign, Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes over Palestine from about 175 – 165 BC. In 168 BC, (about 200 years before Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 24) Antiochus slaughtered 40,000 Jews, plundered and defiled the temple, sacrificed a pig (an unclean animal according to the Mosaic Law) on the altar of burnt sacrifice, and erected an image of Zeus in the Holy of Holies. It was considered the worst kind of sacrilege and blasphemy imaginable by the Jewish people. Jesus apparently envisioned something like that but only worse that was going to happen in the lifetime of those to whom He was speaking. And He was exactly right. It did. What was it?

I’ve learned a lot myself recently about what is called the Jewish War. Folks, this was the 9/11 event of the first century times 100! In fact, 9/11 doesn’t begin to compare with the horror of those years between 66-70 AD. We get most of our information about that terrible period from a Jewish author and historian named Flavius Josephus, who wrote a comprehensive, eye-witness account which was first published in 75 AD. The Jewish people revolted against Roman rule in 66 AD, and the Roman hierarchy decided to put

an end to it. It all culminated in a five month long siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Romans built a wall around the walls of Jerusalem, deliberately burned the city's granaries and storehouses, and polluted the water reservoirs. The choice offered? Surrender or slow starvation. Those who tried to escape were crucified by the Romans often at a rate of 500 people a day. Things got so desperate inside the city that people were reduced to eating human and animal excrement. One woman killed her infant son, roasted his body, ate half of the body and hid the remaining half. Josephus estimated that 1,100,000 died in the five month long siege of Jerusalem and another 100,000 survivors were sold into slavery.

The Roman army finally broke through the walls in August of 70 AD. Roman soldiers brought legionary standards into the temple precincts and offered pagan sacrifices to their gods on the altar of burned sacrifice. Then the temple was burned to the ground and the site leveled. 250 years earlier, Antiochus might have blasphemed the temple by offering pigs as a sacrifice. The Romans ended any and all animal sacrifice. Antiochus might have desecrated the temple. The Romans utterly destroyed it – “the abomination that causes desolation” indeed. Jesus told those listening to Him that when they saw this was about to happen, it was time to abandon Jerusalem. “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” (Mt 24:15-16 NIV) I was fascinated to learn that in 66 AD, the entire Christian community that lived in Jerusalem at the time, evacuated the city and moved to a village named Pella – some 65 miles northeast of Jerusalem in Galilee. Why? Because they knew of Jesus' prophecy and they heeded His warning.

Now, when you read v. 29-31, it sure sounds like Jesus' second coming, doesn't it? There's all this language about the sun be darkened and the stars falling out of the sky. There's clouds, angels, and trumpets. This is one big reason why many Christians – and particularly our dispensational premillennial friends – believe that all of this is about the future. We 21st century Christians are so conditioned to assume that the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of Heaven is a depiction of Jesus' return that it's hard to gain any hearing for a different perspective. Let me say right here as clearly as I possibly can: I absolutely believe in the literal, personal return of Jesus – His second coming – at the end of human history. In fact, I believe Jesus begins to talk about that future event in v. 36. But I have come to believe that Jesus is talking about something other than His second coming in v. 29-31.

In those verses, Jesus uses a whole lot of words and concepts found in Old Testament prophecies, in general, but also the Old Testament book of Daniel, specifically. What He says here sounds a whole lot like Daniel 7:13-14, ““In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (NIV) Notice something significant: Daniel's vision is not about the Son of Man coming down to Earth from Heaven (the second coming), but

instead the Son of Man coming to God the Father in Heaven. There He is worshiped, honored, and enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Notice carefully how Jesus puts this in v. 30, “Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven.” (NIV) What sign? I believe Jesus is saying that when that generation saw the literal destruction of Jerusalem and the temple less than 40 years in the future, both Jesus’ followers and Jesus’ enemies would know then that Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah was accurate and true beyond any shadow of a doubt. They should understand that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was God’s judgment upon that specific generation of Jewish religious leaders and Jewish people for their rejection of Jesus, the true King of Israel. Jesus was fully and forever vindicated by the destruction of the temple. What He said about it came true. Even some of those who had mocked Jesus and cheered His crucifixion would realize, as Jerusalem and the temple burned down around them, that everything Jesus predicted had come true. They would know then they had rejected the Messiah. Jesus’ authority and authenticity was completely and forever vindicated.

Then in v. 32-35, Jesus simply underlines again that if that group of people listening to Him then and there were discerning and alert to the signs that He just gave them, they could be ready and prepared for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. “This generation” – meaning people alive at the same time as Jesus - would see it all with their own eyes. Now, I realize you might find my interpretation of these verses farfetched and improbable. But, at least you’ve heard a different perspective maybe for the first time ever. And from someone who’s got just as high a view of Scripture as those with whom I might disagree. Please understand that whatever interpretation you accept, you’ve got some “splaining to do.” If my interpretation – faulty, as it may be - prompts you to go out, read and study this part of God’s Word for yourself, then I say, “Mission accomplished!” Let me close with a brief word about two very important implications of what we’ve read and thought about today.

UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATIONS.

First, Jesus is a true and trustworthy prophet. We acknowledge Jesus as Savior, as Lord, as King, and as God. But He was and is a prophet, too. In Matthew 24 He made a bold prediction about the temple’s destruction and it was fulfilled accurately and completely. That should be a faith builder for you and me as well. You see, if Jesus was that “spot on” about the temple’s destruction, you can be very sure that He’s just as accurate about His second coming. Jesus has never been wrong about anything. If He said He will return again to this Earth, you can be very sure that He will. We’ll think more about His second coming next week. But, just remember, Jesus could actually come this week! Are you ready? Are you prepared? Are you watching? Are you alert?

Second, Jesus is the true and eternal Temple of God. I wish I had more time to develop that thought today. When the temple was destroyed literally in 70 AD, I believe it signified God’s repudiation of it forever spiritually. Hear again what Jesus said at the end of Matthew 23, “Look, your house (not my house) is left to you desolate. For I tell

you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (v. 38-39 NIV) Then at the beginning of chapter 24, Jesus literally left the temple courts never to return. I believe the temple was abandoned by God at that moment, not just geographically and physically, but also spiritually and symbolically. The glory of God's presence, the true Shekinah glory, had just departed.

I believe part of what's going on here is designed to tell Jesus' disciples – both then and now – that the temple in Jerusalem is no longer, and never shall be again, where you and I go to meet God. The temple is no longer, and never shall be again, the place of God's dwelling or the place you go to hear His voice. The temple is no longer, and never shall be again, the place where blood sacrifice is offered. The temple is no longer, and never shall be again, the place where forgiveness of sins is found. All these things are now found in Jesus alone and forever. He is the true and eternal Temple of God. He is now the One we go to in order to be with God, because He is God. He is now the One we listen to because He is the voice of God. He is now the One through whose shed blood we find forgiveness for our sins. So when the temple in Jerusalem was leveled and flattened such that not one stone was left upon another, Jesus' disciples back then and Jesus' disciples today – you and me – should know and appreciate that Jesus has taken its place forever. Jesus alone is the true and eternal Temple of the living God. In Him we find reconciliation with God. In Him we enjoy a relationship with God. In Him we find God, because He Himself is God.

George Owen Walton from Virginia was an estate appraiser. That meant he had first dibs on things like rare coins, guns, jewelry, stamps, and books. He built up quite a collection. When Walton had an opportunity to purchase one of only five 1913 Liberty Head nickels ever minted, he jumped at the chance. He paid \$3,750 for that one nickel in 1945 and told his family that it was worth a fortune. But after Walton died in 1962, appraisers surprisingly declared his nickel to be a fake and of no value. They returned it to the disappointed family. That 1913 Liberty Head nickel stayed hidden in a strongbox on the floor of a closet. Eventually Walton's nephew, a man named Ryan Givens, inherited the nickel. Even though it had been dismissed as a counterfeit, something told Givens that his uncle was right. In 2003 the other four 1913 Liberty Head nickels went on display, and a million dollar prize was offered to anyone who could produce the fifth. Givens submitted his uncle's coin for evaluation once again. After hours of comparing and contrasting it against the other four nickels, six expert appraisers announced that Walton's coin was the real deal. Eventually Givens sold the nickel for \$3.1 million - a hundred years after it was originally minted. Imagine a coin worth more than \$3 million collecting dust in the back corner of a closet for decades and decades because it seemed worthless, even to expert eyes!

If you're a follower of Jesus today, you possess a treasure of far greater value than the 1913 Liberty Head nickel. And it's not shoved away in the bottom of a closet; we walk around with it every day. Not "it", but Him! Do you ever stop to realize who you have living inside of you? The Bible says it's "Christ in you, the hope of glory."