

The End of the Age

Matthew 24:1-14

The Olivet Discourse, Jesus' last and longest, occurs in Matthew 24 and 25. Jesus is the new Israel who is called out of Egypt, baptized in the Jordan River, tempted in the wilderness, ascends the mountain like Moses to teach the law, sends disciples like Joshua to take the land, establishes the kingdom as David did, teaches wisdom like Solomon, and now like Jeremiah He warns Israel of the temple's destruction and judgment. He makes it clear these things will take place within a generation, which makes this text no less relevant to our time. We live in God's world where there are wars and rumors of wars, nations rise and fall, churches thrive and perish, and God's kingdom comes from heaven to earth anyway.

This Generation

Jesus just wept over Jerusalem and her refusal to be sheltered under His wings. The blood of the prophets would fall upon *that* generation, the city would be left desolate, and not one stone of the temple left upon another (23:35-24:1). If we read Matthew in context as a historical narrative this isn't a huge surprise. Jesus compares that generation to children who won't respond to a jig or a dirge; they don't like fasting John or feasting Jesus (11:16-19). He warns Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum that it will be better for Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom than for them in the day of judgment (11:20-24). He laments that "faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you" when the disciples doubt the power to heal an epileptic boy (17:17). John the Baptizer warns the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized not to rest in their descent from Abraham but to bear fruits worthy of repentance because "the axe is laid at the root of the trees" (3:10). When would the nation be felled? The Israelites remembered the judgment that fell on the tabernacle at Shiloh (1 Sam. 4), the northern kingdom being taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians destroying the temple and taking Israel into exile in 586 BC. Cyrus restored Israel and sponsored the rebuilding of the temple, but once again they are occupied by foreign powers, this time the Romans. Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom of God, but Israel's leaders don't receive Him. This is the context for all of Christ's teaching, and the Olivet Discourse is mostly if not entirely about events that will occur in Jesus' generation: "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (24:34). Preterism is the view that Matthew 24 was fulfilled in 70 AD when Rome marched on Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, that "this generation" meant Jesus' generation and His prophecy vindicated. A futurist interpretation believes most if not all of the Olivet Discourse will be fulfilled in our future, missing its context and meaning. Some details and images of this passage may be obscure, but we interpret difficult things in light of clear ones. It's hard to imagine how Jesus could have been more plain: within one generation not one stone will be left upon another (24:2, 34).

Wars & Rumors of Wars

Naturally the disciples want to know when these things will happen, the signs of His coming, and the end of the age (v. 3). Jesus doesn't say "In about 20 centuries, so don't worry about it." He warns about false prophets claiming to be the Christ who will deceive many (v. 5). They'll hear of wars, rumors of wars, but should not be troubled by these things because the end is not yet (v. 6). Nation will rise against nation, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes will only be the beginning of sorrows (vv. 7-8). We know about some false prophets and messiahs: Theudas and his 400, Judas the Galilean, and an Egyptian with 4000 soldiers (Acts 5:37-38, 21:38). The historian Josephus writes about the thousands who died in the temple because

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they were told by a false prophet they would receive signs of their salvation. Speaking of January through March in 69 AD, the Roman historian Tacitus says: “I am entering on the history of a period rich in disasters, frightful in its wars, torn by civil strife, and even in peace full of horrors. Four emperors perished by the sword. There were three civil wars; they were more with foreign enemies; they were often wars that had both characters at once” (*The Histories* 1.2). 69 AD was the year of four emperors when Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian succeeded one another, and Rome endured civil war. This came about because the great persecutor Nero, who lit his dinner parties with Christians and blamed them for his burning of Rome, committed suicide in 68 AD. The command to “Take up your cross and follow me” makes a lot of sense in this context. When we think of suffering, the first thing that comes to mind is likely health-related or financial: cancer, heart disease, job loss. But for Christians throughout most of human history persecution was a problem. Jesus calls us to be like Him, ready to suffer faithfully, and not losing our minds when the world begins to fall apart.

Witness to All Nations

Believers would be delivered up to tribulation and killed, hated by all nations for Christ’s sake (v. 9). Like Christ, like Christians. Remember the way Jesus was scapegoated. Some believers really struggle when other Christians are lied about, slandered, much less attacked or killed (v. 10)—“Why doesn’t he have a good testimony with outsiders?” We need to read our Bibles and know the Lord Jesus Christ. This would happen frequently as the conflict between Israel and Rome grew. It would happen again when Rome declined and fell, causing Augustine to defend the church in *The City of God*. False prophets would rise up and deceive many, and because of lawlessness the love of many would grow cold (vv. 11-12). People usually don’t cite their lawlessness as the cause of failing love, but it is. Listen to God, walk in His ways, confess your sins, and love will abound through you in both emotion and action. Jesus’ prediction might seem gloomy, but it’s only a stop on the way to glory: he who endures to the end will be saved (v. 13). People abandon Christ because of x, y, and z, but He says to keep the faith even if it kills you. As bad as things will get, the gospel of God’s kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to the nations and then the end will come (v. 14). The end of the story is not heaven for the individual and then lights out on the cosmos. The witness that goes out to the nations is bigger than Israel. God will use their unbelief and the tragedy of this judgment to further the comedy of His kingdom. This also is not new. Shiloh resulted in the ark residing in Obed-Edom the Gittite’s house, no doubt saving many Philistines (1 Chron. 13:14). Israel went into Babylon and blessed it mightily (Jer. 29). Christians would be persecuted, killed, and scattered, and this cataclysm would cause to the gospel to be preached throughout the known world (*oikoumene* v. 14). In Paul’s fundraiser letter to the Romans, he says their faith is known in all the world (1:8). He’s taken the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum and plans to go to Spain (15:24). God uses all of our suffering, sadness, and certainly our trusting death to send the good news of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection into this world. He brings new worlds out of old ones, and life out of death.