

“Christ’s Warning to the Church”
(Matthew 24:1-41)

We come this morning to what is probably one of the most controversial chapters in the whole Bible. Many Christians, not to mention biblical scholars and theologians, have wrestled with it over the centuries trying to understand exactly what it means. I’m sure that many of you have read and reread it, struggling to understand what Jesus was saying, especially if you came out of a Dispensational background. This chapter appears to tell us what’s going to happen just before Jesus comes again, and that we should be ready when He does, so that we are not caught off guard. What better reason could there be to study it? There are other places in the Bible which tell us of the same events, such as the parallel passages in the other Gospels, the book of Daniel chapters 7-12 and the book of Revelation, which, as you know, are also difficult to understand. Now I know that some of you would like to get into the whole matter, and certainly all of us would like to have all of our questions answered with regard to the Second Coming of Christ and the things that will take place at the time, but we’re not really going to be able to take the time to do it here. What we’ll want to do is to focus specifically on what Jesus tells us in this chapter.

The biggest problem in understanding this passage has to do with understanding exactly when Jesus said these events were going to take place. If we knew the time frame, then we could better understand what He was referring to. We really have only three choices – the same three choices when it comes to understanding the other passages. Jesus may have been referring to things that have already happened in the past. There are those who believe that every prophecy – including the Second Coming of Christ and the final Judgment – has already taken place. They are called Preterists, or more accurately, Radical Preterists. Or Jesus may have been referring exclusively to the future, to the things that were going to take place just before His Second Coming in glory. Those who hold to this view are called Dispensationalists. They believe that Jesus is describing here a seven year period of tribulation for Israel just prior to His return to set up the Millennium. We won’t have time to consider their view now, but perhaps we can in a Sunday School class in the future. But Jesus may also have been referring to things which happened in the past and things which would also take place in the future. Just about everyone of the Reformed persuasion looks at it in this way. This is the position that I am going to take in this sermon and the next one on this subject, since there is far too much here to deal with in only one sermon. I believe that Jesus was speaking first and foremost about what was going to happen in the near future in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and that He was warning His disciples who were living then to be ready so that they might escape God’s judgment that was about to fall on His rebellious covenant people. But I also believe that because this terrible event was a coming of Christ in judgment, Jesus also uses it, at least in some respects, to show us what will happen when He comes again at the last day to warn His people in every age to be ready.

Now let me begin by explaining why I believe this passage has to do primarily with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A. D. 70. This will take up the rest of our time this morning. Unless we see this point, we really won’t be able to understand what Jesus is saying here.

First, we need to consider the context. Matthew 24 and 25 both follow on the heels of the eight woes Jesus just pronounced upon the leaders of Israel. Because of their rejection and constant persecution both of Himself and His prophets, He was going to hold them guilty of all the righteous blood spilled on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood Zechariah, the son of Berechiah. He said that judgment for these sins would fall upon “this generation,” that is, the generation of Jews who were then living. Their rejection of the Gospel – of everything that God had for them in Christ, of everything their law and ceremonies and sacrifices and priests and institutions were pointing to, of Christ Himself and all His servants – was a crime so great – because it was committed against so much light – that the consequences would be devastating. Jesus didn’t often weep in the Scripture, but this rejection on the part of His people was so great and the judgment coming so terrible, that He did weep over them. And then He pronounced those very solemn words, “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate,” that is, the glory of Israel was departing once and for all. They had rejected the Lord of the covenant, the King of Israel, and now He was rejecting them. It was God’s purpose to take the kingdom away from them and to give it to another nation which would produce its fruits (Matt. 21:43). All that was left for them was destruction, which is what Matthew 24 is all about.

Now all these things took place inside the Temple. Everything we have seen over the past several weeks, from chapter 21:23 through the end of chapter 23, all took place on the same day and in this same place. And now we read that Jesus came out from the Temple and was going away. He was doing what He said He would do. The glory was departing. He didn’t enter that Temple again. And when He was crucified, at the time He cried out and yielded up His human soul into the hands of His Father, the veil of that Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, showing not only that the Temple service was now obsolete, but that the Lord had rejected that house.

As Jesus came out from the Temple and was going away, His disciples came up to point out the Temple building to Him, probably because they understood something of what Jesus was saying about it, but were wondering how these buildings made of such massive stone could ever be overthrown. Josephus wrote that the Romans beat those walls with their battering rams for six days without leaving so much as an impression on them. But Jesus answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (vv. 1-2). When Titus eventually overthrew the city, he ordered that the whole city and the Temple be demolished. This of course, peeked the curiosity of the disciples, and so they came to Him privately, as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley opposite the Temple, where they would have had a clear view of the Temple, and asked, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” They apparently saw these three events as all being tied together, and they really were, if you understand what events they refer to here. The disciples at this time had a faulty view of what was coming. They may have thought that Christ was coming again with an army to overthrow the Romans and to return the kingdom to Israel, without even taking into account the words that Christ had already pronounced against them. Little did they know that Christ was coming back with an army of Romans to overthrow Jerusalem! But they may also have believed that the end of the age, or the consummation of all things, would follow shortly after that. When Jesus answers their question, the age He seems to be referring to is the end of the Old Covenant age and the beginning of the New, just as He warned the Pharisees earlier that the blasphemy of the

Holy Spirit would not be pardoned in this age or in the one which was coming, a time when there would still be sin and the possibility of committing the unpardonable sin (Matt. 12:32), showing that this coming age doesn't have to refer to the end of all things. But the important thing to see here is that the disciples were asking Jesus, "When will these things be," that is, when will these Temple buildings be destroyed? This is the question Jesus is answering in this chapter. Jesus ties the other two questions together in His answer by telling them when He is coming in judgment and when the age of the Old Covenant will finally be over, because these would all happen at the same time.

And so the first reason why we should see this chapter as referring to the overthrow and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple is because it follows on the heels of Christ's curse and because Jesus says these things to answer the disciples' question as to when the Temple would be destroyed. But there is another reason. There is something else Jesus says at the end of these things, which is very similar to what He said at the beginning. Near the end of chapter 23, after Jesus charged the Jews with the guilt of all the righteous ever killed, He says, "Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation" (v. 36). Now notice toward the end of what He has to say in chapter 24, just before His warning to his disciples to be ready, He says in verse 34, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." "This generation" is clearly the generation of men that Jesus was referring to in 23:36. These were the men He was holding responsible. These were the ones who were about to suffer so horribly in what was coming upon Jerusalem. A generation in Scripture is about forty years. This is the reason the Lord made the children of Israel wander in the wilderness for forty years. He wanted that whole generation of those who had rebelled against Him to die off. Jesus pronounced His woes upon this generation about A. D. 30, and He brought this desolation upon them in A. D. 70, or almost exactly 40 years later. He said, "This generation will not pass away until *all these things take place*" (24:34). All the things Jesus was referring to would be fulfilled before that generation passed away, and they were fulfilled in A. D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

There are several other things which show us that Jesus was referring primarily to what happened in A. D. 70. Notice that throughout the chapter, Jesus is speaking to His disciples. He says in verse 4, "See to it that no one misleads *you*," in verse 6, "And *you* will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that *you* are not frightened," in verse 9, "They will deliver *you* to tribulation, and will kill *you*, and *you* will be hated," in verse 15, "Therefore when *you* see the abomination of desolation," in verse 20, "But pray that *your* flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath," and so on to verse 33, "Even so *you* too, when *you* see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door." And on the basis of these things, He warns them, "Therefore be on the alert, for *you* do not know which day your Lord is coming" (v. 42). Since these warnings were graciously given to them so that they might avoid this judgment, it must have taken place in their days. Jesus said, "*This generation* will not pass away until *all these things take place*" (v. 34).

If we look at a parallel passage in Luke 17, we will see that this event, even though it appears to be referring to the Second Coming of Christ, doesn't actually refer to that, but to a coming of Christ in judgment. In Luke 17:22-37, we read, "And He said to the disciples, 'The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, "Look there! Look here!" Do not go away, and do not run after *them*. For just like the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day.

But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses *his life* will preserve it. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left. {Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left.}' And answering they said to Him, 'Where, Lord?' And He said to them, 'Where the body *is*, there also the vultures will be gathered.'" Now we don't have time to look at what is meant by one being taken and another left. But I want you to see two things. Jesus says here that on the day He is revealed (v. 30) – which is the same day referred to in verse 24 – that “on that day,” verse 31, “let not the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house go down to take them away; and likewise let not the one who is in the field turn back.” This is obviously the same event referred to in Matthew 24. But notice that this coming of Christ cannot be His Second Coming. When that happens, the dead in Christ shall rise first, living Christians will be transformed into His glorious image, and all the dead will be gathered to one place for judgment. This can't be referring to that event, because here the godly are warned not to go into their houses or to turn back into their fields to get anything, but to run. If this was the Second Coming, they would all simply be transformed. Going back into the house or turning back in the field wouldn't be an option. This is referring to the coming of Christ in judgment to bring retribution on the Jews for their crime of rejecting Him. But notice secondly, that because they were going to be left on the earth, and because this judgment was coming unexpectedly, they were to watch and be ready to run. Noah didn't know when the flood was coming, but he knew that it was. Lot was warned to run from judgment. But all the others of Noah's day and the citizens of Sodom and surrounding cities didn't know. It came upon them unexpectedly and they were utterly destroyed. Jesus is here warning His disciples, and the rest of His people who would believe through them, to be ready for this coming judgment. They were to be ready because it was coming in their day. And when it came, they were to run and run quickly, or they also would be destroyed in that judgment. Jesus here was graciously warning His church, just as He did in the days of Noah, just as He did in the days of Lot, so that they would be preserved.

Now as I said, this just opens the topic of what Jesus is saying in Matthew 24, but this is all we have time for this morning. But I would leave you with this one thought: the Lord graciously warns us of all He intends to do, so that we too will be ready when He does it. That judgment upon Israel was not the first, nor will it be the last. There is a coming judgment on the final day. That is the one we need to be ready for, and we will be, if we will only trust in Christ. In two weeks, we'll continue looking at this chapter, but for now, let's pray and thank the Lord for His gracious warnings.