

Two Questions

Matthew 24:3-14

As we begin a study of the Olivet Discourse this afternoon, you need to be aware of the context, particularly those verses we studied two weeks ago. Jesus is lamenting the judgment which shall soon come upon the nation of Israel, a judgment justly deserved because of their rebellion and rejection of Jesus their Messiah. And so we read,

Mat. 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

Then comes his warning of impending judgment,

Mat. 23:38 “See! Your house is left to you desolate; 39 for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!”

The desolation of that judgment is made plain, in words with unmistakable meaning to a first century Jewish believer, namely that the destruction of the nation of Israel is represented by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem—the physical destruction.

Mat. 24:1 “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. 2 And Jesus said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”

As we come to verse 3 this afternoon, you have to recognize just how dramatic and unsettling those words must have been to Jesus’ disciples. It would be something similar to some sort of credible warning against our own country today, a warning perhaps that the Capitol Building in Washington DC would be

totally destroyed, along with the White House. And actually, the whole of our capital city would be wiped out, including the Pentagon as the symbol and representation of our military strength. The whole nation, represented by her capital city, would be made desolate, and a comprehensive alliance between Russia and China would bring about the end of our nation. “Not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.”

The disciples have a very easy-to-understand question in response:

v.3 “Tell us, when will these things be?”

Explain yourself? What do you mean? How can that be? Those questions have that sense of incredulity, of disbelief, of such astonishment as to otherwise think that such a thing would be absolutely impossible. “When will these things be?”

They then ask a further question, asking for a sign, presumably so that they could be prepared.

v.3 “And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

We will study the beginning of the answer to that question this afternoon, but before we look at Jesus’ answer, we need to further evaluate the questions he is being asked. The first question is, quite simply,

I. THE QUESTION OF WHEN.

v.3 “Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be?”

So, the issue is that the city of Jerusalem, representing the

nation of Israel, will be destroyed. All of us would be asking the same question, “When?” That’s certainly human nature, human curiosity. It’s a question we can all immediately understand. That same question comes to us at many places in the Scripture, at many occasions in the life of Jesus especially.

I think that it is fair to say that the focus of the disciples was upon the destruction of Jerusalem, as the gospels of Luke and Mark make no reference to Jesus’ coming nor to the end of the age. We read,

Luke 21:7 “So they asked Him, saying, “Teacher, but when will these things be? And what sign will there be when these things are about to take place?”

Mark 13:3 “Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately, 4 “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?”

So there are two questions here. The first question is when? When will the temple be destroyed? When will the Old Testament system of sacrifice and worship be abolished? And the second, related question, is “What will be the sign?”

Matthew adds an insight, however, that the other two gospel writers don’t emphasize or even mention. Matthew adds reference to Jesus’ coming, and with that coming, refer to “the end of the age.” And those are the two things in our text that we need to understand well, the meaning of Jesus’ coming and the meaning of the end of the age.

There is no way for us to understand fully what the disciples knew and understood at this point, other than the consistent biblical pattern of their overall lack of understanding about Jesus’

death and resurrection. He had to teach them frequently about that, that he would be put to death. And, subsequently, that he would be resurrection. For example,

Mat. 12:39 “But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

So what did the disciples understand? What did they know about the future, specifically about the end of the age? I can’t say, because the Bible doesn’t tell us, but we do get the impression here that they thought Jesus was talking about the end of the world! The end of Jerusalem, the end of the temple, would have been for them the same thing as the end of the world. So Matthew’s gospel tells us that when they ask for a sign regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, they make a connection with what is called “the end of the age.” And they consider that to be the same thing as Jesus’ coming. Thus this question of “when” requires us to have an...

A. Understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ “coming.”

When will this destruction of the temple take place? And then the second question, “What will be the sign of Your coming?” In my outline I put coming in quotes to emphasize its importance. It is the Greek word *parousia*, if you have studied any Greek, and while my point here isn’t to give you a Greek vocabulary lesson, I want to stress the great significance of this word. The word “coming” in English is a very plain and simple word, but as a translation of the Greek, it is a frequent and explicit reference to Jesus’ appearance on earth. And we typically talk about his first coming and his second coming—his first coming, of course, referring to his incarnation. And his second coming to that which

is future, which was likely in the minds of the disciples as they referred also to the end of the age.

So Jesus coming, in their mind, it would seem, referred to the end of the age. Thus, in their mind, the destruction of the temple would be at the end of the age. Thus, again, is the question of when. “Tell us, when will these things be?”

Let me skip ahead just a bit to give you the framework of my thinking in answer to that question, going to,

v.34 “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”

So this is key to understanding what Jesus is referring to, in his answer to those two questions from his disciples. “When will these things be?” Well, soon. In fact, “this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.” In other words, I believe Jesus is answering his disciples questions with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem that did, in fact, take place within that generation, in AD 70. So the focus of this Olivet Discourse is upon that destruction. That perspective gives me significant understanding of the book of Revelation as well, where we read too a similar perspective, beginning with,

Rev. 1:1 “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place.”

In the last chapter of Revelation we read this,

Rev. 22:6. “These words are faithful and true.” And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place. 7 “Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

So my perspective on this is that much of the prophetic

language of the book of Revelation, tied in with this Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, are prophesying with regard to the destruction of Jerusalem. If you have studied these things and want a label, it is the partial preterist view, but I’m not wanting to start with a label and then use that to explain the Scripture. I want to expound the Scripture faithfully. So this “coming” of Jesus, to which we have these signs here in Matthew 24, is the “coming” associated with the completion of his first coming to earth, a series of events beginning with his conception and birth and ending with his resurrection, ascension and judgment upon Jerusalem. Thus the “coming” which Jesus explains to us in our text is the completion of his first coming, since “this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”

That understanding enables us to rightly and fully understand Jesus’ words later in this chapter,

v.36 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. 37 But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. 38 For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39 and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. 40 Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. 42 Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. 44 Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

What then is the proper...

B. Understanding of the meaning of the end of the age.

v.3 “And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

Remember verse 34. “This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.” So the end of the age would be not the end of the world, but the end of the age of the Old Covenant, the end of the age before Christ, the end of the age of Israel as the nation of God’s people. The end of the age is the end of the Jewish temple, the end of Israel, the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system. And the definitive end of that age, the definitive end of the age of the Old Testament, was the historical destruction of Jerusalem, which came 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the typical span of a generation. “This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.” That’s Jesus’ answer to the question of when.

Now Jesus answers the second question regarding the sign that will be given. And broadly speaking, it is,

II. THE SIGN OF TRIBULATION.

What will be the sign of the destruction of Jerusalem, when “not one stone shall be left here upon another”? What will be the sign that the Old Covenant is rendered obsolete by the presence of Jesus our great high priest? Well, tribulation. Sorrows. Persecution.

v.8

The cause of that tribulation is not hard to identify, specifically,

A. The deception of those who falsely claim the name of Christ.

v.4-5

The Apostle John gives us a bit more insight with this warning

in,

1 John 2:1 “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”

The spirit of the Antichrist, the spirit of those deceivers who will say “I am the Christ” are already in the world. They “will deceive many.” And we read further,

v.11-12

That is such a frequent warning in Scripture, and I won’t take the time to read other cross references, but over and over again we are warned of such deception, warned of false prophets. And along with that deception is,

B. The deadly dangers of international conflict and disasters.

This spiritual battle between Christ and the deceivers will play out in history. So we read,

v.6-7

Along with those disasters we read of,

C. The horrors of religious persecution.

v.9-10

Let me emphasize again how accurately all of these words describe the buildup to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in AD 70. I don’t believe Jesus is giving a broad

prediction of the end of the world, at the end of this current in which we live, but rather a prediction, a sign, that the end of the Old Testament age was near. And that generation, that first generation of the church between Jesus ascension and the destruction of the temple, was noted for both these things—both false messiahs and terrible persecution against God’s people. Again, for emphasis, that end would come within the generation of those disciples to whom Jesus was talking.

Thus Jesus answers his disciples’ questions with an encouragement, an exhortation—a challenge. A challenge to persevere.

III. THE CHALLENGE OF PERSEVERANCE

After the warning of verse 12 comes,
v.13

So this challenge comes with,

A. The encouragement of a promised reward. v.13

Again, the idea, I believe, is for that generation currently alive, his very disciples included. Jesus warns them of great danger, and encourages them to endure, with a great promise. “He who endures to the end shall be saved.”

This isn’t new. We studied many months ago,

Mat. 10:21 “Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. 22 And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities

of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

There is another great encouragement in this passage. Not just a reward to the faithful, but if your heart is in the right place, this is, by far, the greater encouragement.

B. The encouragement of a worldwide witness of the gospel.

v.14

Again, I believe the end there is the end of the Jewish nation of Israel, the end of the shadows of the Old Covenant sacrificial system. And the idea was well established on the day of Pentecost, that the gospel was no longer for the Jew only, but also for the Gentile. So we read this,

Acts 2:1 “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. 7 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, “Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.” 12 So

they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “Whatever could this mean?” 13 Others mocking said, “They are full of new wine.” 14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. 15 For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. 16 But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. 18 And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. 20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. 21 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.’”

So there it is! God says, “I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh.” All nations. All people. And that day alone, we read, that “about three thousand souls were added to them.” So before Jerusalem is destroyed, before the temple is torn down, before then, the gospel will go beyond the nation of Israel to the whole world. And so it did, even as you can read in the book of Acts,

Acts 2:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Interestingly, the words just before that express the same question which we are studying this afternoon, “When will these things be?” The question reflected a failure to fully understand even what we have studied today, but Jesus’ answer is so

consistent. The question was this,

Acts 2:6 “Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.”

So if you ask the question when, Jesus doesn’t give a specific answer, beyond the reference to this present generation. But if you ask about a sign, his answer is consistent, namely the worldwide witness of the gospel to all the nations. And I should not, with emphasis as we conclude this afternoon, that this anticipation of Jesus’ coming in the destruction of Jerusalem is a picture for us foreshadowing his second coming at the end of this age. And so the answer to those two questions in our own experience is the same. When? We don’t know. We won’t know. But what is the sign of that return of Jesus in triumph and glory at the end of this New Testament age?

Acts 2:8 “...you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Thus Jesus’ words in our text this morning, applying first to the destruction of the Jewish temple when “not one stone shall be left here upon another, also apply to our expectation and anticipation of Jesus’ second coming. And the encouragement applies to us as well.

v.13 “But he who endures to the end shall be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”