

Jesus Predicts the Temple's Destruction

Devotional Reading: Matthew 23:1-12, 37-39

Background Scripture: Matthew 23:37-24:35

(See also Mark 13:1-23; Luke 21:5-24.)

Matthew 24:1-14

¹ Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. ² “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

⁴ Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the

end is still to come. ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are the beginning of birth pains.

⁹ “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ 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.



Key Text

“Do you see all these things?” he asked. “Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” —Matthew 24:2

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 2: Jesus and the Temple

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Relate facts about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70.
2. Explain the relationship between the temple's destruction and "the end."
3. Review what spiritual habits help him or her endure in the faith and recommit to practicing them.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Is This a Sign of the End?
- B. Lesson Context

I. Looming Destruction (Matthew 24:1-3)

- A. Warning of Ruin (vv. 1-2)
- B. Asking for Guidance (v. 3)

II. Coming Hardships (Matthew 24:4-12)

- A. Fake Messiahs (vv. 4-5)
Counterfeit Culture
- B. Fearsome Conflicts (vv. 6-8)
- C. Faithless Persecution (vv. 9-10)
- D. False Prophets (vv. 11-12)

III. Reassuring Victories (Matthew 24:13-14)

- A. God's Faithful Endure (v. 13)
Endure, Together
- B. Good News Prevails (v. 14)

Conclusion

- A. Living Between the Times
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Is This a Sign of the End?

When I recently tried to find something to watch for family movie night, I was surprised to realize how many new movies are about war. I suppose it had never occurred to me just how fascinated we are with violence, natural disasters, and accidents. It's not just visible in the entertainment industry. In addition to these fictional stories coloring our screens, real life is also filled with terror on all sides. Tragic realities saturate the news, from devastating hurricanes and wildfires to domestic violence and armed conflict. Ordinary life can leave us both weary and worried. When confronted with this grim reality, it's common for people of faith to ask, "Is this a sign of the end?"

Today's text is part of Jesus' answer to that question from his followers.

B. Lesson Context

The temple of Jerusalem played a central role in Israel's history, and it had a special connection with the nation's kings. King David had sought to build a temple as a grand replacement for the portable tabernacle, which Israel had carried through the wilderness (2 Samuel 7:1-3). Instead, God said that David's son would build a temple (7:12-16). True enough, Solomon built the temple as David had planned (1 Kings 6:1-38). But Solomon proved unfaithful, and the nation divided into two after his death (11:9-13, 26-40). Instead of a place for all God's people to come, the location of God's sanctuary became a source of jealous conflict between the kings of Judah and Israel (12:25-33; compare Deuteronomy 12:5-7). The unfaithfulness of Judah's rulers contributed to the temple's being stripped of its glory. The armies of Babylon eventually destroyed it after a successful siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21).

When exiles of Judah returned to their land in 536 BC, the faithful set to work rebuilding a temple (Ezra 1:1-7; 3:7-13). The resulting structure was far from the grandeur of the first temple. Hundreds of years later, Herod the Great made the second temple magnificent. Herod had a selfish

motive for his project: to show his family's right to rule. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, states that ten thousand skilled workers and masons had contributed to this structure, and it had required a thousand carts to bring the bright white stones to set in place.

Jesus entered this renovated temple after coming to Jerusalem and being heralded as God's promised King (Matthew 21:1-11). But instead of praising this impressive temple, Jesus cast out the money changers and merchants and criticized what he saw (21:12-16). The temple's leaders questioned his authority to do this, and he silenced them with a dilemma using a question of his own (21:25-27) and parables (21:28-44). In Matthew 22-23, Jesus remained in the temple and continued to face down his hostile audience. He did not relent from his criticisms, and fear of the Passover crowds kept Jesus from being arrested immediately (21:46).

The book of Matthew is recognized as featuring five "discourses." Today's text is part of the fifth of those, known as the Olivet Discourse. Mark 13:1-13 and Luke 21:5-19 are parallel accounts to today's text.

I. Looming Destruction

(Matthew 24:1-3)

A. Warning of Ruin (vv. 1-2)

1. Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

Prior to Jesus' departure from *the temple*, he had criticized the religious leaders for their hypocrisy by pronouncing seven woes on them (Matthew 23:13-36). The sharpness of the acrimonious exchanges between Jesus and the religious leaders must have unsettled *his disciples*. That may be why we see their attempt to turn the mood in a positive direction with their observation about the grandeur of the *buildings* of the temple (compare Mark 13:1). Perhaps they imagined Jesus would one day assume power over this temple, for he was the promised Son of David (Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42). His very presence was "greater than

the temple" (12:6). So who better to appreciate its physical appearance?

2. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

Jesus' reply was shocking. It was one thing to criticize the leaders of the temple. But to predict the temple's utter destruction? To speak against a temple in the ancient world was to invite the death penalty (example: Jeremiah 26:1-9).

The disciples may have expected that Jesus had a grand vision of a better temple. But his prediction *not one stone here will be left on another* was only about the tear-down part of such a project, leaving out the rebuilding part. His wording is ominous: all the stones would *be thrown down* (rather than falling down on their own; compare Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6). There is no record of the disciples asking Jesus who would be doing the demolition; the political context made that clear enough: Jews were allowed to keep worshiping at the temple by the permission of Rome.

It was horrifying to think that Rome would turn against the Jewish people and their temple. In fact, the Gospel of John attributes this very fear to the high priest and his advisors: "The Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation" (John 11:48). Ironically, the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, at least partly out of fear that his message could spell an end to the temple and their vested interests.

But Jesus knew better: Jewish nationalists would rebel and antagonize the Romans, who would respond with lethal military precision by surrounding the city and razing the temple in AD 70, some four decades after Jesus' prediction.

B. Asking for Guidance (v. 3)

3. As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

After Jesus and his disciples left the temple, they crossed the Kidron Valley to arrive at *the Mount of Olives*. There, as they looked back upon the temple, the disciples desired answers to

questions that were echoing in their minds. Mark 13:3 specifies that it was Peter, James, John, and Andrew who asked the questions.

The mental context of the disciples is a clue to the questions they ask. By Jesus’ *coming*, the disciples were not thinking of what Christians today call the “second coming” or “return,” since the disciples did not believe that Jesus was going to depart physically in the first place. Even right up to the time of Jesus’ ascension, their expectations were mistaken (Acts 1:6).

Thus, what the disciples must have meant by *coming* was the ascension of a king to his earthly throne, with his full power on display. Perhaps they reached this (mis)interpretation from Jesus’ statements about the “coming” of the Son of Man (Matthew 10:23; 16:27-28; compare Daniel 7:13). This expectation means that the disciples used the phrase *the end of the age* in the sense of the ending of an era, not the physical destruction of planet Earth. The Greek word translated *age* here is the basis for our English word *eon*, which refers to an immeasurably long time period. The disciples thought the destruction of the temple would signal Jesus’ immediate kingship; he could then wipe away the wicked kingdoms of this world and bring God’s justice to the poor and oppressed (see Isaiah 11:4).

What Do You Think?

How does Scripture describe the kingship of Jesus?

Digging Deeper

What specific behaviors are needed of those living under this kingship?

recognize it’s *not* me.” Pretenders and wannabe liberators were abundant in the first century (compare Acts 5:36-37; 21:38). *Many* people will be easily deceived, and the disciples must not be among them.

The word *Christ* is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word *Messiah* (John 1:41; 4:25), both of which mean “anointed one” in English. Several decades after the temple was destroyed in AD 70, a man who called himself Simon Bar Kokhba (meaning “son of a star”) proclaimed himself to be the Messiah on the basis of the prophecy in Numbers 24:17 of a star coming out of Jacob. The Romans crushed his rebellion in AD 135; those who were deceived by the man’s claim and followed him were either killed or enslaved.

When we think of how many people today are deceived by even simple scams, we should constantly be vigilant. “False messiahs and false prophets” are those who show impressive signs, supposedly from God (Matthew 24:24). This will be the reason for their remarkable, though temporary, success in recruiting many followers. In his first letter, John says to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1).

What Do You Think?

What steps should believers take to ensure we are not misled by deceptive teachings?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture texts come to mind regarding this effort?

II. Coming Hardships

(Matthew 24:4-12)

A. Fake Messiahs (vv. 4-5)

4-5. Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many.

Jesus doesn’t answer the disciples as they expect. Instead of “Here’s how to recognize me,” his response is along the lines of “Here’s how to

Counterfeit Culture

You’ve undoubtedly noticed that we live in an age of counterfeits. Some manufacturers find making and selling knockoffs quite profitable, putting well-known “designer” tags and logos on their counterfeit products. Thus, they try to pass their products off as having been made by someone else. Handbags, perfume, household goods—you name it, there are scam artists everywhere. They are just waiting to try to gain your trust.

When it comes to listening to the authorita-

tive voice of God, there can be no substitute. The words of Jesus are trustworthy, but plenty of other voices are crying out to be heard. These voices tempt us with shortcuts to wealth, power, or cultural influence. Have you been tuning in to let God speak truth to you of late? Or do you settle for a cheap imitation? —D. A.

B. Fearsome Conflicts (vv. 6-8)

6. “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

The militarized “peace of Rome” (also known as *Pax Romana*) resulted in a period of relative peace in Jesus’ day. But when the reality of war or the *rumors of wars* reassert themselves, that was not to be taken as a sign of *the end*. Christians must be prepared to endure conflicts while carrying out their mission to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

7. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

Psalm 2:1-2 vividly describes the world’s situation, where rulers and nations “conspire.” So this will be nothing new. All the challenges and tragedies of living in a fallen world will come and go. Food shortages (*famines*) and natural disasters (such as *earthquakes*) will be common.

Daily life will feature constant reminders that humans are mortal, that life is short, and that the time to receive God’s mercy is at hand. An unpredictable world underlines a sense of urgency.

What Do You Think?

How can you use your time, talents, or resources to help people suffering as a result of wars or natural disasters?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take in the upcoming week to make this a reality?

8. “All these are the beginning of birth pains.

The disciples’ original question was about how to recognize “the end.” But Jesus has been answer-



Visual for Lesson 9. Display this visual as you review the commentary and discussion questions associated with Matthew 24:4-5.

ing in terms of *the beginning*. The word translated *birth pains* can refer to something more than just mental anguish. The same word is also used in the sense of labor pains in several places in the old Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (example: Isaiah 13:8).

Certain birth pains were, therefore, to precede Jesus’ full reign. But *all these* painful things were also everyday experiences of the disciples—in other words, nothing new. The disciples were, therefore, not to interpret such things as imminent harbingers of the end.

C. Faithless Persecution (vv. 9-10)

9. “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.

Jesus then switched his warnings from those global in nature to those personal to his disciples. They were to expect intensified persecution in their role as his representatives (*because of me*). Tradition holds that all Jesus’ apostles except John died as martyrs. These martyrdoms would begin with James, the brother of John (Acts 12:2).

10. “At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,

The effect of all this suffering will be to fragment the church (*hate each other*). Hardship and persecution will lead some to give up (Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21). Much has been written about the imperatives of the positive “one anothers” in

Scripture. But the verse before us warns of the certain occurrences of at least two negative “one anothers.”

D. False Prophets (vv. 11-12)

11-12. “and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,

The reality of and the danger posed by *false prophets* is addressed in more than a dozen places in the Bible. This, too, will be nothing new (2 Peter 2:1). The fact that they will be successful, at least for a time, is affirmed by the result that they shall *deceive many*. The warning is therefore necessary so Jesus’ followers keep their guard up and are not led astray.

III. Reassuring Victories

(Matthew 24:13-14)

A. God’s Faithful Endure (v. 13)

13. “but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Is there any bright spot in Jesus’ predictions? Is there any sign of God’s victory while evil continues to roil the world? The answer is a resounding “Yes!” The parable about the soils holds out hope for those who receive God’s message with faith; God has a great harvest, a great victory (Matthew 13:8, 23). The victory of God is visible through the enduring faith of Jesus’ followers around the world. As Jesus said, “the gates of Hades will not overcome [my church]” (Matthew 16:18). The reign of Christ among the faithful is visible as God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10).

Jesus’ warnings about forthcoming hard-

ships prepared his disciples for this declaration. Yes, suffering would continue. Yes, persecution would divide the people of God and war against the faith. But for those who understand that reality, who heed Jesus’ warnings, there is strength for endurance and assurance to *be saved* in the end.

What Do You Think?

Which of Scripture’s promises help you endure as a follower of Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How will you be a source of encouragement for other believers who may be troubled by the world?

Endure, Together

Children can do a lot more than we expect. When my daughter showed an interest in riding a bike, she was confident that she would soon do it without training wheels. She wasn’t wrong, and her persistence paid off quickly. She became the youngest child on the block who was riding on two wheels.

We started an endurance test together: each day, we would ride just one block farther before we turned around for home. Before long, we could make it to a trail. Even at four years old, she managed to ride a 12-mile loop—to her parents’ amazement.

There is no shortcut to practicing endurance. I tend to think that the company we keep makes all the difference. Jesus could ask his disciples to endure a difficult path, but he did not ask them to endure alone. The community of faith—the church—would stand; this Jesus promised. Have you been relying on a fellowship of believers as God intends, or have you been trying to journey through life alone? As you’ve seen the trials of our world, have you been coming alongside others who suffer?

—D. A.

B. Good News Prevails (v. 14)

14. 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.

The coming destruction of the temple may look

How to Say It

ascension	uh-sen(t)-shun.
Kidron	Kid-ron.
Olivet	Ol-lh-vet.
Pax Romana (Latin)	Pahks Ro-mah-nah.
Thessalonians	Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz (th as in thin).

like a diversion of God’s plan, but it would not be. God’s purpose was never to designate a plot of land for a permanent temple. Its construction was secondary to God’s promise to bless all nations through the descendants of Abraham and to build a kingdom through the family of David (Genesis 12:3; 2 Samuel 7:12-15).

For people in the Roman Empire in Jesus’ time, *gospel* or “good news” was commonly associated with the announcement of a new king or ruler. Heralds delivering the message could say, “I have good news for you: we have a new king.” For the children of Abraham, good news was also connected to God’s promise to end their exile and establish a divine kingdom (Isaiah 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1). Declaring good news was to declare that God had fulfilled his long-standing promises to restore his people.

Both of these fit what Jesus announced. Despite all the hardships and suffering his followers were to experience, God’s *kingdom* was to be heralded and proclaimed for all to hear. This is the establishment of God’s promised King, one whose justice shall be known throughout the world. God still works through his people to fulfill every promise he has made, to multiply the followers of the new King. The *end* is delayed—not forever—but long enough that the *testimony* of God’s people can go forth (compare Matthew 28:18-20).

changed human nature in this regard. We ask the same questions as the first-century disciples.

In that regard, Jesus did not answer in terms of “the end,” but in terms of “the beginning.” And that beginning features all the same human evils as have ever existed. Rather than planning for the end that we imagine, we do greater service to Christ by recognizing the beginning, which is always *now*, the time between Jesus’ first and second comings.

So what does that mean for his followers in this day and age? It means we must remain faithful, patient, and willing to endure hardship and suffering. We can do so because we have hope that comes by submitting to Jesus’ authority, despite the world’s self-indulgence (Matthew 24:37-51). As we wait for our King to return, we represent him on earth, noticing Jesus’ presence among those in need (Matthew 25). As Jesus has been faithful to his Father in Heaven, so we must be faithful to Jesus.

This is our task: faithfulness. The best sports teams are good at playing both offense and defense. We are on the offense with the gospel and the power of God behind us (Matthew 28:19-20). We play good defense when we train ourselves to recognize false prophets and false Christs. Failing to be on the offensive in taking the gospel to the world puts us in the position of the unfruitful tree that is subject to being cut down (Luke 13:9). Failing to play good defense—the primary point of today’s study—results in being led astray (1 John 2:26; 3:7; contrast Ephesians 4:14).

What Do You Think?

What steps can your class take to support the advance of the gospel in all the world and to all nations?

Digging Deeper

What further training and guidance will your class need in this regard?

Conclusion

A. Living Between the Times

People want to know the future! That was the impetus for the disciples’ questions about “the end.” After all, if I can see the definite signs that “the end” is approaching, won’t I be able to make better plans? The passage of 20 centuries has not

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have complete knowledge of time. Help us not be so focused on “the end” that we neglect “the beginning” within which you expect us to minister daily. Show us how to reveal your Son in the midst of suffering. Help us view suffering as your Son desires as he strength-ens us by your Spirit to endure, grow, serve, and proclaim your Son as King as we anticipate his return. In Jesus’ name. Amen!

C. Thought to Remember

Suffering is inevitable, but so is Jesus’ return.