

THE SON OF MAN COMING

Matthew 24:1-51
Key Verse 24:30b

“And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.”

Today’s passage begins the last of the five discourses in Matthew’s gospel. These are the instructional passages which Jesus gave his disciples to believe and to teach (Mt 28:20). In this passage Jesus presents his disciples with a “big picture” of the future by revealing the conclusion of human history: it is his coming in power and great glory. Jesus reveals that he is King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus wants his disciples to peer into the corridors of the future through the lens of his promises so that we may live in hope. And, in light of this hope, he gives us specific instructions on how to live.

These days, by use of GPS and satellites, we now pinpoint our exact positions and know where we are in reference to the world. We don’t feel lost or confused, even in unknown territory. Likewise, when we have spiritual insight we know where we are going and how to navigate, even though we encounter challenges that we never expected. We can keep our compass fixed on the reference point that leads us to our final destination: the kingdom of God. This is essential for us to live as Jesus’ disciples.

We will study in two parts. In part 1, verses 1-31, Jesus teaches his disciples that he is coming in power and great glory, and how to interpret signs of the times properly. In verses 32-52 Jesus teaches how to live in the hope of his coming, using several interesting analogies.

I. The Son of Man coming in power and great glory (1-31)

This passage begins with Jesus leaving the temple. Jesus’ heart was broken over the religious leaders. Just then, the disciples came up to him and called his attention to the temple building. It was made of vast marble stones and inlaid with gold in various places. It was a symbol of the religious life and culture of Israel. To the disciples, it was most impressive. It captured their imaginations and made them forget everything else. I understand them. Upon coming to Chicago from a small town in Oregon 30 years ago, I was so fascinated by the Sears (Willis) Tower that a simple errand downtown took me half a day. Caught in the allure of glittering human culture, the disciples were spiritually dull. Jesus said to them, **“Do you see**

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all these things? Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (2). Jesus foretold the complete destruction of the temple (slide 5). This came to pass in A.D. 70.

Here we learn that Jesus wants his people to see through the wealth and glory of worldly things and to have spiritual insight. These days, so many people are fascinated by virtual connections. The latest edition of Newsweek tells us of a U. Maryland study which found that most college students are unable to function without their media links to the world. As we admire modern technology, it is easy to swallow godless philosophy and lose spirit. But these fascinating things will perish. An electro-magnetic pulse, if detonated in a proper position over the United States, could potentially disable all electronic devices within a 1,000 mile radius. We cannot trust in technology, money, weapons, or any other elements of modern culture.

Jesus sat down on the Mount of Olives. The disciples asked him when the destruction of the temple would take place and associated it with the sign of his coming and of the end of the age. In a sense, their question is also our question. In light of God’s sovereign reign over our lives and all things, how are we to understand cataclysmic events? How is everything going to turn out in the end, and what should we do? Jesus answers, not by giving us a timeline we can easily understand, but by anticipating the dangers we will face and teaching us how to avoid them, and by giving us a sure promise.

First, watch out that no one deceives you (4 -5). Look at verses 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.’”** Religious false messiahs entice suffering people, sympathizing with their weaknesses and making false promises. They can win many followers. But in the end they self-destruct. There are also secular false messiahs, such as rock stars, athletes, politicians, and teachers who abuse their fame and authority to take advantage of naive people. Though Jesus warns us to watch out for false messiahs, the real warning should be applied to our own inner lives (slide 7). St. Paul explained that those who follow false messiahs, and I quote, **“perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion...”** (2 Th 2:10-11). The best way to resist false messiahs is to love the truth of the gospel.

Second, these are the beginning of birth pains (6-8). Jesus said we would hear of wars and rumors of wars. This is so true of almost every period of time that it needs no elaboration. The U.S. has been at war for such a long time in Afghanistan

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and Iraq that we have gotten used to it. There are currently also wars in Columbia, Somalia, Sudan and Syria. In the Middle East, Israel and Iran have been threatening each other and the world. How should we respond to these wars? Jesus Said, “...**see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come**” (6b). In the midst of terrible wars, God still reigns, and he wants us to trust him.

Jesus went on to say that nation would rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there would be famines and earthquakes. In the last ten years there have been serious famines in Sudan, Malawi, Niger, the horn of Africa, Myanmar, North Korea, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, East Africa, Tajikistan, Kenya, Sahel and West Africa. According to the USGS, in the last month there have been significant earthquakes off the coasts of Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, and in Nevada, Indonesia, China, and Vanuatu. Just yesterday, July 14, 2012, there were at least 31 recorded earthquakes around the world which were considered minor. These ongoing natural disasters claim lives and devastate property. How are we to think of them? (slide 9). Jesus said, “**All these are the beginning of birth pains**” (8). The Apostle Paul said, “**We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time**” (Ro 8:22). These pains, though hard to bear, are precursors of a glorious new world. The joy that is to come will make us forget all our sufferings. So we can endure these pains with hope.

Third, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world (9-14).

These verses describe the ongoing spiritual conflict in the world. Jesus predicted that his disciples would be handed over to be persecuted and put to death and hated by all nations because of him. Usually, leaders try to promise many good things to their followers. But Jesus was brutally honest in foretelling the persecution of his people. Persecution comes simply because they love Jesus. The world hates Jesus, and it hates his disciples too. Christians are being persecuted in many places. In June and July, suicide bombers from the Nigerian Islamic group Boko Haram, have planned and carried out attacks on Christians in Nigeria that have left many dead. When I was in China last year, I heard of a Christian couple at a University. The day before they were to be married, the husband disappeared, kidnapped by government officials. The next day, on what was to be her wedding day, the bride was taken away also. While bearing the pain of persecution, many turn away from the faith and betray and hate each other. A young North Korean woman was washing her clothes in a tributary of the Tumen River. She accidentally dropped a small Bible. A fellow North Korean saw this and reported it to the police. The woman and her father were soon executed. In an atmosphere of betrayal and

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wickedness, the love of most grows cold. But Jesus promises that the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (13). Standing firm means holding on to the truth of the gospel, especially the love of God, and loving God and others in return. Our real battle is not really with fearsome enemies who persecute us, but to have God's love burning within our own hearts. How can we have God's love within us? In Revelation 2, our Lord Jesus speaks to the church in Ephesus, a church which has withstood many persecutions in a commendable manner. Yet Jesus rebukes her for losing her first love. Then he says, "**Consider how far you have fallen! Repent...**" (Rev 2:5-6). If we are cold-hearted, let's repent before the Lord.

Let's read verse 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.**" Here Jesus uses a unique phrase, "the gospel of the kingdom." The gospel refers to Jesus' death and resurrection. Christ died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Through the gospel, the power of sin, death and the devil are destroyed. Christ forgives our sins, makes us children of God, and gives us his Holy Spirit so that we can know him and grow in his image and do his work. Through the gospel, God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the glorious kingdom of the Son he loves (Col 1:14). Now Jesus is our King and we are members of his glorious kingdom. It is our great privilege to share in advancing his kingdom.

According to Jesus' promise, through all opposition, the gospel prevails. By God's own zeal and will the gospel is preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations. Then the end will come. Here, Jesus encourages us to think about how to reach the world with the gospel (slide 12). According to the U.S. Center for World Missions, and their Joshua Project statistics, there are 16,552 people groups in the world and a total population of 6.9 billion people. Among them, 7,009 people groups are considered unreached, including a total of about 2.83 billion people. Nearly 3 billion people have not been reached with the gospel as far as we know. What should we do about this? Wait for God to accomplish it? Of course, God will do it. But we also must do our part. 2 Peter 3:11 tells us, "**as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.**" Sometimes we feel overwhelmed just by trying to keep up with daily life. It is tempting to adopt a "bunker mentality." But rather than being defensive, we should take the offensive in spreading the gospel. God blesses those who do both in this life, and in the age to come.

Fourth, flee to the mountains and pray (15-21). Jesus' words in this section refer to the desecration of the temple foretold by the prophet Daniel (Da 9:27; 1-

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11:31; 12: 11). This was understood to be fulfilled when Antiochus Epiphanes IV invaded Jerusalem in 167 B.C., set up idols in the temple and offered pigs as sacrifices. This abomination provoked God's wrath and led to desolation. Antiochus died suddenly of a disease in 164 B.C., on the verge of winning a victory over the Parthians.

Jesus was warning his people that in the same way, the temple would be desolated again. This happened when the Romans invaded in A.D. 70. General Titus destroyed the temple and set up an Emperor's image to be worshiped. Jesus told his people to flee to the mountains without stopping to take anything. We, too, may have to flee suddenly in some way or other. So we should not be too attached to culture or material things. Corrie Ten Boom said, "I've learned to hold precious things loosely, because it hurts when God pries open my fingers and takes them from my hands."

Jesus also taught us to pray. The judgment that came upon the people of Jerusalem made no allowances for the weak or helpless. Even pregnant women and nursing mothers experienced great difficulty. What could people do in that awful distress? Jesus said in verse 20, "**Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.**" These may seem to be strange prayer topics. But they were Jesus' invitation to pray in detail for God's deliverance in the time of trial. Historically, the Christians who saw the Romans entering Jerusalem remembered Jesus' words, fled, and found safety in the mountains around Pella. When we consider the end times, and our hearts become anxious, it is time to pray, committing the future to God.

Fifth, the Son of Man will come like lightning (22-31). The days of distress are very difficult. There are no human solutions, and people are looking for divine help. At that time, false messiahs and false prophets proclaim the coming of the Messiah, performing great signs and wonders. But Jesus clearly told us that these signs and wonders are not the evidence we should look for to validate the identity of the Messiah. Rather, when he comes, he will come like lightning that lights up the sky and is visible to all people at one time. Jesus' coming again will not be a local event, but a universal event that everyone will witness at the same time. We must hold on to Jesus' promise and avoid the deception of false prophets.

Immediately after the time of tribulation, as verse 29 says, "**the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.**" These signs will be so dreadful and universal that everyone in the world will stop what they are doing and look. Look

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at verse 30. **“Then will appear the sign of the son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.”** Christ will be revealed as the eternal ruler of the kingdom of God. At that time all peoples of the earth will mourn. Though there are so many crying people, Christ will wipe the tears from the eyes of his elect ones.' He will send his angels and gather them from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other (31). He will welcome them into his kingdom, where there is no death or mourning or pain. Their tears will give way to joy and peace in the glorious presence of Christ, and in his love, forever. However, for those who did not believe in him the tears of anguish will never stop. Their destiny will be eternal punishment in hell (25:41).

II. Jesus teaches us how to live in the hope of his coming (32-51)

In verses 32-51 Jesus teaches how his people should live in light of the glorious hope of his coming again. In brief Jesus teaches us to be certain of his promise, to keep watch for him, and to be faithful and wise servants.

First, be certain of Jesus' promise (32-35). When leaves begin to sprout on trees, we know that summer is near. Likewise, the signs that Jesus has given us in this passage should inspire us to recognize that Jesus' coming is near, right at the door. We should live in a constant state of anticipation. Our hope in Jesus' coming again should be burning in our hearts as though he will come today or tonight. How can we have such a hope? We can do so by holding Jesus' words in our hearts. His promises inspire us to come into his presence. Then we don't feel far from Jesus, but very near to him. In verse 34, "generation" refers to the time from Jesus' ascension until his coming again. Jesus' coming again is very certain. Jesus said in Verse 35, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away"

Second, no one knows when he comes, so be ready and keep watch (36-44). Though we can know that it is the season for Christ to come again, Jesus tells us very clearly in verse 36: **“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”** In spite of these clear words, there have been many who predicted a day and time for Christ's return. Herbert Armstrong gave four specific predictions in the years of 1936, 1943, 1972, and 1975. Harold Camping made four predictions in the years of 1994 and 1995 which all failed. He then made two more predictions in 2011. We should note that some respected Christian leaders, such as Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Timothy Dwight, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell have all suggested

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dates for Jesus' return at some point. This kind of speculation may be a waste of time.

In verses 37-44 Jesus gives three examples that teach us how to be ready. While the people of Noah's day went about their business: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, the flood suddenly came and took them all away. They knew nothing about what would happen until it was too late. We should not be surprised or influenced by people of the world who indulge their flesh without any regard for Christ and his coming. Though the world does not acknowledge it at all, it will happen anyway. When Jesus comes, two men will be in a field; one will be taken and the other left (40). Though people are engaged in the same activity at the time of his coming, there is an invisible difference between them. One has a personal relationship with Christ through faith, and the other does not. When Jesus comes again, he will be like a thief in the night. His coming will be at an hour we do not expect him. Verse 42 says, **“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”** Since we do not know, we must always be ready and keep watch. This requires prayer.

Third, be a faithful and wise servant (45-51). Though the disciples began by asking Jesus a question, he ends by asking them a question. In verse 45 Jesus asks, **“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?”** Jesus challenges his people to be faithful and wise servants as they await his return. Such servants hold to the promise of his return without wavering. They do what he wants them to do. It is because they have a trust and love relationship with him, and a joyful sense of responsibility. They are not only faithful, but also wise and diligent. They work creatively and fruitfully, making the most of every opportunity. Here, giving food can refer to sharing God's word with those in need. But it can also refer to any trust the master has given. When the master returns, and sees their progress, he rewards them with greater privilege and responsibility. On the other hand, those servants who ignored his return and indulged in abusive behavior and debauchery will suddenly behold their master return to punish them.

This passage teaches that Jesus' coming again is certain - the final victory of the King of kings. Let's hold his promises in our hearts and share his mission of spreading the gospel. Let's keep watch and be ready, and be faithful and wise stewards until he returns.