

Jesus Teaches About His Return

Matthew 24:1-14

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When you think about the future what comes to mind? If you had to describe your outlook towards the future in one word, which word pop into your brain? Excited? Nervous? Anticipating? Dreading? Hopeful? Fearful? Irrelevant? Concerned?

Our attitude towards the future may depend on the state of our lives right now. If life is going well now, we likely don't want much to change. We'd like to stay here and keep things as they are for as long as possible. So our thoughts about the future might be "I hope things continue as they are right now."

But if our lives are in turmoil or there's something not going well, we maybe hope for a better future. When we're in those situations, we often will use the present to move towards that better future. We're even willing to do hard things or work through difficult challenges in the hope of future improvement.

Usually, our lives contain a mixture. In some areas, things go well. IN other areas, we struggle. So we have to figure out how to get through the struggles while enjoying the blessings of the present.

Some of us may work too much or strive too hard to ensure everything in the present goes well. We also try to control everything we can about our future. If we attain a state where things are going well now and look under control for the future, only then we can experience contentment. But this is a never ending pursuit that we rarely attain.

Some of us may only focus on the present and think little about the future. Our outlook may be "why worry about something you can't do anything about until tomorrow?" Yet we may refuse to address concerns or valid questions. We may neglect the preparation required or the hard work involved in following God's call on our lives.

So what is an appropriate way to live our lives in the present while having a healthy consideration of the future? That's the question we're going to look at today. Our study in Matthew brings us to this. Jesus responds to a comment about the present with some teaching about the future.

Last time we were in Matthew, we traveled the difficult verses of Matthew 23 where Jesus pronounces 7 woes against the Scribes and Pharisees. The section ended with Jesus sorrowful lament over Jerusalem and all that would happen to the city and her people. As Jesus and the disciples leave the city, this discussion about the present and future arises.

As we examine Jesus' teaching here, we will have an opportunity to consider our outlook on the future. But we will not only consider 6 months from now to a year ahead. Jesus directs us to consider the medium and end times future. He will teach about this through all of Matthew 24 and 25. He will show us how to live in anticipation of the end times and His return.

One hope I have for you throughout these two chapters is that you will grow in confidence of God's control over the future – the end times, the long term and your immediate future. And I pray this will better equip all of us to go into our future with a God-centered confidence. Knowing how we can invest today in preparation for tomorrow.

Matthew 24:1-14 (ESV) (Page 698 in the pew Bibles).

24 Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Jesus' finishes His encounter with the Scribes and Pharisees. He has said what he needed to say. Now he leaves the temple. This is his final departure. His leaving is more than just a physical departure. He leaves behind the temple leaders and the religious system that flowed from this location.

Then the disciples come up to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Now when I first read that in preparation for today, I thought it odd. Why would the disciples point out the buildings of the temple to Jesus? They'd been there before. He had just come from the temple where he saw all the buildings. They walked beneath them at that very moment and could plainly see them. Why point out the temple buildings?

From the other gospels, we get a clearer picture of what happened. In Mark 13:1, Mark reveals that the disciples said “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” Luke 21:5 states “Some were speaking of the temple and how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings.” So the disciples pointed out the grandeur, beauty and wonder of this temple complex.

It was pretty impressive after all. This was the second temple for Israel. Solomon’s glorious temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Some Jews came back from exile and 70 years later completed a pretty simple second temple. But it had been built up over the years. And now Herod had invested tax dollars in beautifying the temple and building up the temple courts. He did such a magnificent job that the Jewish temple was known as one of the greatest of that time. It was renowned for its beauty and known throughout the Roman world.

This might have been a result of the centralization of Jewish worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Unlike pagan gods that had temples in every city, there was only one Jewish temple. So all the supporters of Judaism contributed to its upkeep. Jews regarded the temple site as the most holy site in the world’s most holy city. Jews from around the world intensely committed themselves to the temple by sending the annual tax for its maintenance. Herod had it adorned with beautiful stones so that it apparently gleamed or sparkled from a distance. So these mostly Galilean disciples from up north were likely impressed again by the temple’s massive stones and beauty.

But then Jesus drops a bombshell on them in verse 2. “You see all these buildings or stones? Truly I tell you there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” The stones bonded together or stacked on one another would not remain that way. They would be “thrown down.” So Jesus does not predict decay or abandonment. Stones thrown down portrays some sort of violent and intentional destruction.

Imagine the disciples taking in that comment while walking beside 50 and 100 ton stones stacked together to form the foundation for the temple mount. Imagine them looking up to the beauty of the temple and thinking about it being torn apart or destroyed. It would be like us seeing the downtown Edmonton skyline completely wiped out and reduced to rubble. Jesus predicts this would happen to the temple mount and by extension the whole city. And His prediction came true. In just over 30 years, the Jewish revolt against Roman rule started in the year 66. It would include the recapture of Jerusalem by the Romans, the slaughter of perhaps a million Jews and the burning and destruction of the temple. It

has never been rebuilt to this day though Jews still pray at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount which contains some of Herod's massive foundation stones.

Suddenly, these disciples are faced with some very disturbing news about their confidence in the present. Something is cooking in the future that will disturb their comfort. The pride of Judaism and the center of Jewish religious life stood tall in front of them. Yet Jesus predicts it will not last.

Matthew tells us in verse 3 that Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives. That's the mount across the valley from the temple. It's about 2 or 3 kilometers walk. So maybe after Jesus words, the disciples have about 15 minutes to think and talk among themselves. By the time they arrive at the Mount of Olives with Him, they ask for more information.

They approach Jesus with 2 questions. **1) When will these things be?** When will the "one stone not being left on another" thing happen? **2) What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?**

It's very important for us to keep these two questions in mind throughout all of Matthew 24. It's possible the disciples thought the 2 questions referred to simultaneous events. I mean what could be more end times like to a first century Jew than the destruction of their temple? So maybe they thought the temple would be destroyed, the sign of Jesus' coming would appear and then Jesus would return all at once. But history has shown us that these are two separate events. The temple was destroyed in the year 70. 1947 years ago. Jesus has not yet returned.

So Jesus intertwines His answers to the two questions. Why would He do that? Is He out to confuse the disciples? No. I think he gave them the information they needed to live accordingly. And I think the destruction of the temple served to foreshadow what it will be like at the end of the age. So intertwining makes sense though it's a little hard for us. And Jesus never actually answers the first question. He doesn't tell them in the year 70, the temple goes down. But He does instruct them how to live and what to watch for.

So here's where we can learn to how to live today while having a healthy consideration of Jesus' return in the future. **How are we supposed to live in light of Jesus' return?** The first way might be a surprise to us. We might think it irrelevant to us. Yet it was very relevant to them and upon closer examination may have more relevance for us than we think. **Watch out for deceivers about the end.** In verses 4 and 5, Jesus warns them about those who could lead them astray about the end. "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name saying, 'I am the Christ and they will lead many astray.'"

There was great interest and almost end times fever around that time. End times speculation picks up when things are pretty bad and people hope for some sort of deliverance. Since the Jews suffered under Roman occupation, they looked for deliverance. So apparently, there were many who would claim to be a Messiah who could deliver them. These Messiahs would lead people astray by maybe asking for followers to join a rebellion. Or maybe they'd call on their followers to withdraw from life awaiting the end. If Jesus' disciples got hooked into something like this, they could go off mission. They might stop spreading the Gospel because someone told them the end was about to happen.

Jesus warning might have reminded them of how false prophets have distracted God's people for centuries. Jeremiah's warn against false prophets during the siege of Jerusalem in 587. Jeremiah had received a message from the Lord instructing the king to surrender to the Babylonians. This defeat was ordained by God to punish the people for their disobedience. But if they surrendered, it would go well with them. But other prophets promised deliverance. "Things will be ok! The Egyptians will save us." So the king and people refused to surrender. Then the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple with much more thoroughness than if they had surrendered. False prophets led the people astray.

But is deception about the end really an issue for us today? Well in some Christian circles, it might be. Some still try to predict the time of Jesus' coming. Someone wrote a book entitled 88 reasons why Jesus Christ will return in 1988. You can still get it in pamphlet version off of Amazon for 20\$. But the author was wrong. I was really saddened to read this review of the book. *I too was one of the idiots who bought into this hysteria in 1988. I was a naive 21 year old who put way too much faith into anything my church pastor taught. When he brought Edgar Whisenant to our church for a series of talks about the 88 reasons, I believed every word of it because my pastor believed it. As a matter of fact, belief in this book compelled my then girlfriend and I to marry much earlier than we originally had intended. We were taught that what is bound together on earth will be bound together in heaven and so we HAD to get married so we would be together after the rapture occurred. When the designated range of dates passed, I remember there being a lot of confusion and anger in the church and we ended up leaving. After several years of religious exploration dosed with much more skepticism than before, my wife and I both ended up rejecting Christianity all together. I'm not saying that his book caused us to become*

*atheists, but it was a major catalyst for us to start thinking for ourselves about religious issues. In light of that and its novelty value now, I give it 5 stars. Oh, and we just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary!*¹

A few years ago, there was a church in South Korea where the pastor announced the imminent return of Christ and the followers awaited the return in their church. But when Jesus didn't come, people eventually got sick of each other and left. So there is still some of this deception going on where someone claims to know for sure that Jesus is coming back on this or that day which can distract and disillusion those around them.

But we face a deception about this from another angle. This deception is "there will be no end of the age. Jesus is not coming back." How many people do you know at work or school think that Jesus will actually return bodily and then there will be judgment? Does this get talked about in classrooms or lunch rooms? Is it the number one news story? The only thing I see in popular culture is a fixation on a possible Zombie Apocalypse or trying to survive some sort of massive explosion or coming climate change. But there's little or no talk about Christ returning. Think about how much that can impact how we live today if we're convinced Jesus is not coming back. There will be no end. There will be no judgment. That's deception according to the New Testament. Jesus says, "See that no one leads you astray."

Another way we're called to live in light of Jesus' return is found in verses 6-8. Don't be alarmed when you hear about wars or natural catastrophes like famines or earthquakes. **Don't let news about wars or natural catastrophes stop you from carrying on God's mission.** War and the rumor of war of course troubles us. Famines and earthquakes alarm us. But Jesus alerts the disciples to guard against concluding that these events indicate the very near return of Christ. Otherwise, at any news of war or famine or earthquake they might stop what they're called to do.

Instead, Jesus says, these are the beginning of birth pains. When a mother begins birth pains, she knows that a time of suffering awaits. She knows that there will be an end with hopefully the safe delivery of a baby. But the first birth pain does not mean the baby is about to be born. It indicates the start of the birth process. The baby will not come in the next 5 minutes but its coming. So wars, famines and earthquakes remind us the end is coming but does not mean the end is here. They have happened consistently in the 2000 years since Jesus made these statements. They remind us that one day there will be an end.

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/reasons-Why-Rapture-Will-1988/dp/B00073BM8O>

So you and I are called to keep on God's mission for our lives even when we hear terrible things or the potential for some war. Yes, we might be called to go and help in that earthquake and famine zone. But instead of just attributing it to climate change, we need to see it as a reminder of the return of Christ.

Then Jesus gives the disciples some somber counsel. In verses 9-12. **Prepare for persecution and the falling away of people who seemed to be Christians.** Verse 9 "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake." After the resurrection, these disciples would face serious persecution and even death. It's Tuesday of Jesus' last week. Judas is going to be dead in a couple of days. Jesus will die on Friday. James would be the first disciple martyred. He would have maybe a few months to live.

Church tradition tells us Philip became a missionary in Asia where he was apparently crucified in 54. Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero and crucified upside down. Andrew went to Patras in Western Greece and died tied to a cross in 69. . Bartholemew preached in several countries including India. There he was either crucified or cruelly killed in other ways. Thomas also went to India and was eventually martyred by being run through with a spear. Thaddeus was crucified at a city in Turkey or Greece called Edessa in 72. Simon the Zealot is said to have gone to Mauritania in west Africa and then to England where he is said to have been crucified in 74. Matthew went to Ethiopia and was stabbed by a swordsman sent by a king after Matthew criticized the king's morals. James son of Alphaeus lived to be 94 but then was beaten and stoned by persecutors. Only John is believed to have lived into his 90's and died a natural death. Yet through their lives and death, the Gospel spread around the world.

Yet with this persecution, some in the church would be revealed as unbelievers. "Many will fall away or stumble" according to verse 10. They will betray others to the authorities. Those who have come to Jesus primarily for their own comfort will give up Jesus and His followers to remain comfortable when persecution comes.

This will show up in lack of love for one another. One of the marks of God's people is supposed to be our love for one another. But look at verse 10 – They will hate one another. Verse 12 – And because lawlessness will be increased the love of many will grow cold. This could mean their love grew cold towards God or towards one another. Either way, this shows they weren't true believers in the first place. Friends, do you know people who have fallen away from the Lord? I sure do – lots of them.

Not only will false messiahs deceive people about the end. False prophets will rise up within churches deceiving the people within. They will have a successful ministry of deception. Look at how Jesus repeatedly uses the word “many.” Verse 10 – Many will fall away. Verse 11 – Many false prophets will arise and lead many away. The love of many will grow cold – verse 12. One commentator states *“the multiple use of the word translated “many” indicates that a large percentage of the community will apostatize – which means to abandon the faith. This is a somber picture of the community of disciples impacted by persecution. But it is not unlike Jesus’ statements elsewhere when he emphasizes that the gate and way to life are narrow and only a few find it.”* When persecution comes will we fall away or remain true?

Yet there is hope. The sobering realities of verses 9-12 give way to the promise of verse 13. “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” So we need to **Ask for God’s help to endure to the end.** When the majority cool off in their love for Christ only those who endure or persevere will be saved. This is likely not talking about guaranteed survival in the face of persecution. More likely it refers to remaining faithful to Christ to the death or until His return.

While we endure, God has work for us today. **Participate in God’s Gospel proclaiming mission until the end.** Verse 14 – “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations and then the end will come.” So here’s at least one marker. God’s mission of Gospel proclamation must continue until the end. God does not desire that any should perish but all to come to repentance. While we still have time, we must share the gospel with those around us who don’t know it. That includes kids, grandkids, family, coworkers, classmates, friends, and neighbours. And there is some encouragement in this closing statement. It reminds us of God’s control over history. He will bring things to an end in His time.

Watch out for deceivers about the end. Take catastrophic of the end as remarks. Prepare for persecution. Ask God for help to endure. Participate in God’s Gospel proclaiming missions.

So now we have seen five pieces we can live in light of the Jesus return. But I am a little torn on how to apply this to daily life. One the one hand, Jesus commands me not to worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. So we are commanded to live one day at a time. There is great value in that. There is wisdom in enjoying what each day brings and thanking the Lord for His provision and the time we have with each other.

Yet, there is also great value in thinking about the future and preparing for it. We already do that in ordinary ways. Good Fathers think about the future all the time. We discipline our kids to help them grow and learn in becoming responsible young adults. We go to school or get a certificate so we can contribute to society and provide for our families. We may think about the legacy we want to leave for our children and grandchildren. Jesus calls us to think about God's great purposes in the future as we live our lives today.

So the best way I could summarize this message goes like this - **Walk with Jesus to make the most of today while preparing for His return in the future.** How do we do that? Well, we have to learn from Jesus and seek His wisdom on how to live one day at time yet live it in a way that counts for eternity. If I look at Jesus' life it involved making time to be alone with the Father; Receiving instruction and direction from Him for the day; then we go through the day with God's objectives in mind, yet flexible enough to respond and adapt to other people/situations that come into the day.

I think this also means we need to learn to look at people with God's eyes; eternal eyes – That means I often look beyond their external appearance to see the soul in there. How does God want me to interact with this person? How can I treat them the way Jesus would? What does God want me to see or say? In light of the impending judgment and end of history, what might God want me to do in this situation?

Some of us may have to stop placing too much confidence in the present and hoping things stay as they are. We won't be in the same place forever. We won't be at our jobs forever. We won't be the same age forever. If we forget that, we can be blindsided when God moves us on or when things change and it's time for us to move on.

Instead we trust God with today and with the future. We seek Him for guidance on priorities for each day. We walk in the Spirit's power to resist deception and persevere in the faith even when it seems almost everyone else has fallen away. We rest in the fact that even though the world looks like its falling apart, the Lord is still in control. Even though you don't know the future, He does. He will guide you on how to live while you wait for next steps.

We started by asking how do you feel about the future? What words come to mind when you think about? Let's end with this – Go into the future knowing that our good God has everything in control and He will guide you to the steps you need to take at the right time. If we will only walk with Him, He will guide the way.