

## **Series Kingdom Parables**

### **This Message The Sign of the End of the Age**

#### **Scripture Matthew 23:37-39; 24:1-14**

We have been studying the kingdom parables in the Gospel of Matthew. The earliest parables taught by Jesus were for the benefit of His disciples. They were a useful means for Him to explain many important truths about the kingdom of God.

Later parables were spoken to the religious leaders of Israel. By means of these parables, Jesus indicated that the religious leaders had not suitably fulfilled their responsibilities as the covenant people of God, that they were not qualified to enter the kingdom of God, that they would kill the Son of God but that this would not thwart God's purposes, and that the kingdom would be taken from them and given to others. Needless to say, the religious leaders became angry when they realized that Jesus was talking about them.

There are several more kingdom parables in the Gospel of Matthew, but there is a problem in presenting them. The problem is how to properly explain them without first taking into consideration their context. The context is eschatological; that is, it involves us in the study of future events.

In Matthew chapter 24 Jesus described world conditions and events which lead up to the end of this age. The parables we will later think about illustrate and describe these events.

The final public statement of Jesus was a lament about the people of Israel. At the conclusion of His encounter with the religious leaders, Jesus spoke the following words:

**Read Matthew 23:37-39**

Jerusalem represented the heart and soul of Israel. It became the capital city of Israel about 1000 years before the birth of Jesus after David consolidated all the Israelite tribes under his authority. God permitted David and Solomon to build the temple in Jerusalem as a permanent representation of His presence. All able bodied male Israelites were required to be in Jerusalem three times each year for religious festivals. Jerusalem was the center of the cultural and religious life of the Jewish people.

Jesus grieved over Jerusalem because the Jewish people were unwilling to live under the protection and blessing of God. Throughout His ministry, Jesus had urged the people to place themselves under His authority and become members of God's heavenly kingdom. In spite of the supernatural demonstrations of love and mercy Jesus extended to everyone, the religious leaders and, following them, the majority of the people, willfully rejected Him.

As a result, Jesus said that Jerusalem's house would be "left desolate" (more literally, "deserted"). The "house" is probably a reference to the temple. After Jesus spoke these words, He, the incarnate God, Immanuel, the Messiah promised in the Jewish Scriptures, walked out of the temple, thus symbolically leaving it "desolate." Jesus said the temple would be devoid of God's presence until His glorious return, when the people would say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus' abandonment of Israel would not be permanent. The word "until" in verse 39 affirmed that He would return.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem was the launching point for the private conversation with His disciples in chapter 24.

### **Read Matthew 24:1-14**

As Jesus and His disciples were walking away from the temple, the words, "Look, your house is left to you desolate," must have been on the minds of the disciples. They wondered how a structure so central to the nation of Israel and so impressive could be abandoned.

The temple was indeed very impressive. King Herod the Great was known for many construction projects, and the temple was his masterpiece. Construction work had already been going on for 46 years before the public ministry of Jesus began (*see John 2:20*) and it continued for several more years after His crucifixion. The main edifice was constructed of gleaming white marble, and the view from every direction was dominated by the scale of the building.

To the disciples, the temple looked as if it was built to last forever, but Jesus viewed it with sadness. The place which should have manifested the glory of God had, instead, become the object of His judgment, and Jesus predicted its destruction. Not only was it to be deserted by God, but “not one of its stones would be left on another, every one would be thrown down.”

These words of Jesus undoubtedly shocked and dismayed the disciples, and so, at the first convenient opportunity, as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, across the valley from the temple area, they approached Him for an explanation. They had two questions: “When will this happen?” and “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” The first question related to Jesus’ comment about the destruction of the temple. The second had two parts and was linked to the last verse of chapter 23, when Jesus said, “You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” In the minds of the disciples, the questions were closely linked because they assumed that the destruction of the temple would be of such significance that it would be part of the end of the age.

We need to keep in mind the difficulties that Jesus had in answering the disciples’ questions. The disciples had proven that they did not have a very comprehensive understanding of the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. For example, they had not properly understood the characteristics of the Messianic kingdom that Jesus taught. Neither had they had grasped the significance of Jesus’ statements about His approaching arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection.

Now, on this occasion, Jesus had to give the disciples an explanation about the future. He had to give them information about the immediate future, events associated with the destruction of the temple, and the far distant future, about the judgment at the end of the world. He had to explain the shut down of the covenant era of Jewish history and the opening of the kingdom to other ethnic groups. He had to describe the attitudes of people toward the ways of God as well as the pressures which His followers would face. And most important of all, Jesus wanted to emphasize the perseverance and faithfulness He expected of His followers as they would be confronted with all the uncertainties and threats of the coming days.

We have a general understanding of these matters because we have a completed New Testament, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, some knowledge of the history of the Church in the world and to eschatological teaching (teaching about the future), but that was not the case with the disciples. In spite of the prophecies in the Old Testament, they were very limited in their understanding about the future. Looked at from the standpoint of what the disciples wanted to know and what they could absorb in their understanding, Jesus' explanation in Matthew 24 is a masterpiece of communication.

The disciples asked for a "sign" of Jesus' coming and the end of the age. They, like most of the Jewish people, had a fixation on signs. Early in Jesus' ministry, the Jews demanded of Him "a miraculous sign ... to prove his authority" (*John 2:18*). Nicodemus stated, "No one could do miraculous signs ... if God were not with him" (*John 3:2*). The Apostle John mentioned the many miraculous signs the Jesus did (*John 20:30*). The Apostle Paul described the cultural orientation of his listeners when he wrote, "The Jews demand miraculous signs and the Greeks look for wisdom" (*I Corinthians 1:22*). In keeping with their cultural background, the disciples asked for a sign.

Jesus did not want the disciples to look for signs. Even the destruction of the temple was not to be perceived by them as the sign of Jesus' coming or the end of the age. Instead of focusing on signs, Jesus, in His explanation in verses 4 through 12, presented a very general overview of earthly conditions of future years, events which would occur over a very long time.

He first warned His listeners to not be taken in by the counterfeit Messiahs who would appear in the future. He said that the appearance of individuals who would come in His name would, unfortunately, deceive many, but their appearance would not constitute a sign of His return.

And neither would the many wars and rumors of wars which would flare up with regularity as "nation would rise against nation." From our history books, we know that about the many conflicts which have occurred in the past 2000 years. From our newscasts we know that our world continues to be filled with violence and hatred. At the present time there are about 25 active war situations in which more than 1000 people are killed each year.

Jesus also spoke about “famines and earthquakes in various places.” We can add tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and other natural disasters to the list. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that cataclysmic events were not indications that the end of the age was imminent. Catastrophes have occurred in every period of history. They cause a lot of death, loss of property, and suffering, but they are not signs of the end of the age.

Jesus made it clear that “all these happenings,” that is, the false Messiahs, wars, and natural disasters, were comparable to the “beginning of birth pains.” They were marks of the beginning of the end, not the end itself. The phrase, “beginning of birth pains,” implied that the pains and sorrows of life as represented by “all these happenings” would intensify as time went on, just as the pains of childbirth intensify as the time of delivery draws near.

Jesus then gave some examples of the intensification of pain that would be specific to His followers. See verses 9 through 12. Jesus said that His followers would be persecuted, put to death, and hated by all nations because of their association with Him. We know that persecution broke out very early in the history of the Church (*Acts 4:1-30, 7:59-8:3*) and that it continues to be the experience of many believers throughout the world.

Sadly, Jesus had to predict that the pains and the pressures put upon His followers would be too much for many to bear. He said that they would turn away from the faith and no longer live in godly ways. Their love for God and other people would grow cold because of “the increase of wickedness,” a word which can also be translated “lawlessness.”

In verses 4 through 12 Jesus described the general trend of what was, for the small group of disciples who were then listening to Him on the Mount of Olives, the future, but for us who can look back on the past 2000 years, the happenings that Jesus described have been substantially fulfilled. The disciples asked for a sign, but Jesus deliberately steered them away from their interest in signs. He was more concerned about their perspective of the ordinary developments of this present age. As modern day believers, we also need to keep our perspective about this, and not be looking for specific clues about the return of Jesus.

The reference to “birth pains” had its origin in the Old Testament. It became a metaphor for tribulation and judgment (*see Isaiah 13:8; Jeremiah 4:31, 6:24; Micah 4:9-10*). Jesus made it clear that life on this sin saturated earth will be filled with experiences of disappointment, pain, death, and sorrow — example of “tribulations”. Jesus indicated that these pains and sorrows will increase as the end of the age gets nearer. Both physical and spiritual disruptions will become increasingly numerous, intense, and fearful, and will culminate in an especially intense period of tribulation that will immediately precede the return of Jesus.

In verses 4 through 14, Jesus addressed the question about present trends which would lead up to end of the age. In other words He was answering the disciples’ last question first. Jesus gave a realistic picture of history when He answered the question presented by His disciples. However, the most important purpose for His explanation was not to help them have a picture of the future times. The application of this passage is in verse 13. Although the faith of many will diminish and fade away because of the intensity of the physical conditions and the persecutions, the believer who endures in spite of the difficulties, who remains loyal to Jesus, will be saved.

The general meaning of verse 13 is clear. However, this verse has subtleties which make it difficult to understand. For example, what did Jesus mean by the word “saved.” Was He referring to believers who had previously been genuine about their faith who would turn away and whose love would grow cold? And what would happen to those who would not stand firm, who would turn away from the faith and betray others, whose love would grow cold? Was Jesus saying that they would not be eternally saved? Or was He stating that those who stand firm in spite of the pressures of wickedness and lawlessness would be “delivered,” “rescued,” and “preserved” from physical danger? Was Jesus speaking in an earthly sense or from a heavenly perspective?

I sought information from several commentaries, but as I have learned from experience, commentators tend to skip over my most significant questions. So I am left with my own interpretation of the meaning of verse 13. I think Jesus intended the words, “the end,” to be deliberately ambiguous. “The end” can refer to death, the end of physical life. If this is the meaning here, then I think that Jesus was encouraging his disciples to be ready to follow His example.

At the time of this explanation, Jesus was just three days away from undergoing the exceptional pressures and suffering that ended in His physical death. It was through death that He was saved from His incarnational earthly experience. It would be through His faithful endurance unto death that the followers of Jesus would be offered salvation. The lesson here is clear: should a disciple be confronted with the choice of denying Jesus or dying, the commitment to Jesus must be so strong that the forfeiture of life is willingly made.

The words, “the end” can also refer to the end of the age. It is the return of Jesus which will bring about this “end” point. Several Scripture verses indicate that the person who remains loyal to Jesus through the time of intense persecution which leads into the end of the age will enter into glory. The Apostle Paul wrote explicitly about this in his letter to the believers in Thessalonica. He wrote, “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left to the coming of the Lord ... will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (*I Thessalonians 4:15, 17*). Hence, those believers who would be still alive at the end of the age would be both physically saved by the return of Jesus and brought into everlasting glory.

There are a couple of relevant comments I will make. Genuine believers will not lose their eternal salvation by their disobedient behavior nor by their cooling enthusiasm for God. I adhere to the position that a person who has been born into God’s family cannot be unborn. Parents might be unhappy about the choices and behavior of their children, but the children don’t cease to be members of their families. The same is true of the family of God.

On the other hand, there are verses such as Matthew 10:33 and II Timothy 2:12 which state, “If we disown him, he will also disown us.” Obviously, the most prudent course of action for believers is to be faithful no matter what the threat of danger.

The disciples had asked for a sign of Jesus’ coming. Verse 14 may not have been, strictly speaking, the kind of “sign” that the disciples were hoping for, but Jesus clearly provided the condition which had to be met before the end would come. “The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all people groups, and then the end will come.” The verse is probably the strongest statement in Scripture about the responsibility of the followers of Jesus to share the gospel throughout the whole world.

Despite persecution and inconveniences, the followers of Jesus are expected to testify about the kingdom of God. Believers have a personal responsibility to make the God of their salvation known to others. We are called for a purpose: to talk about and demonstrate by our lives the truths of the kingdom of God. From the parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, we learned that both grow together in this age. This is an age of both distress and kingdom advancement.

### **What lessons can we take away from this study?**

1. The proclamation of the kingdom of God is essential. If we really want Jesus to return and the conditions of this earth to be set right, if we really mean it when we pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” then we must do all we can to make the Good News of Jesus known.
2. We must not look for signs which will indicate the end of the age. Some believers are inclined to interpret each separate cataclysmic happening in the world as an indication that the end of the age is just around the corner. If we have in our possession any of the multitude of books which focus on signs or set dates for the return of Jesus, throw them away.
3. Our responsibility is to be faithful to the end, whenever it might be. The distraction of signs and dates can keep believers from living useful and responsible lives in this world now.