

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message Be Ready for the Future

Scripture Matthew 24:15-28

The Gospel of Matthew contains a lot of information about the Kingdom of God. Jesus revealed truths about the kingdom throughout His public ministry. His first public statement was “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” The rough translation of this statement is, “change the way you are going or you won’t be part of the kingdom.”

Jesus told His listeners during the Sermon on the Mount that their righteousness would have to exceed that of the religious leaders or they would not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven (*Matthew 5:20*). The Apostles were taught how to live by the principles of the kingdom of God. And to back up His teaching, He demonstrated the characteristics of the kingdom.

The kingdom is present in the world today in the members of the Church, the Body of Jesus. It is a spiritual, invisible presence. That invisible presence will change when Jesus returns at the end of the age. That’s when the kingdom will be manifested in all its glory and fullness. That’s when God’s purposes “will be accomplished on earth as they are in heaven.”

When the Apostles asked questions about the kingdom and the end of the age, Jesus began His explanation with a description of the general characteristics of our present age. He said it would be a period of many natural disasters and wars, a period with an increase of lawlessness in which His followers would be persecuted, when the commitment of most of them would grow cold and many would even turn away from faith. Jesus said that none of these happenings were specific indications that the end was near, only that they were the “beginning of birth pains.” The only positive accomplishment of this age would be the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom, which would go out to all the people groups of earth before the end would come.

In the reading for today, we will notice that Jesus becomes quite specific with His information, particularly in regard to the final days before His return to earth at the end of the age.

Read Matthew 24:15-28

Verse 15 begins with a word carefully chosen to connect new information to His previous description. The word “so” at the beginning of the reading has the meaning of “therefore” or “accordingly.” Verse 15 does not introduce a brand new topic, but rather, gives instructions about what to do in view of circumstances previously described.

Beginning with verse 15 Jesus’ description moved beyond general characteristics of this present age. Jesus directed the attention of His listeners to a prediction made by the prophet Daniel. Daniel was given an amazing amount of information about the future of God’s people. His visions enabled him to see hundreds of years into the future.

Daniel actually referred to the “abomination that causes desolation” three times (*Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11*). In Daniel 11 the phrase was associated with Antiochus Epiphanes, who, in 168 BC, desecrated the temple by dedicating it to the Greek god Zeus and by sacrificing swine on the altar. In his efforts to wipe out Judaism, Antiochus reportedly killed 40 thousand of the residents of Jerusalem, and made slaves of as many others.

In Daniel chapters 9 and 12, the phrase, “abomination that causes desolation,” was associated with the evil ruler who would appear at the very end of the age. The angel who passed on the information to Daniel stated that this ruler would set up the abomination about three and a half years before the return of Jesus Christ and His destruction of human world empires.

In the book of Daniel, there was a clear distinction between these two rulers, and their separate but similar actions. Antiochus was a ruler in the Greek empire and the other, later, and more despicable ruler, was associated with the fourth empire. In the book of Daniel, Antiochus was the illustration and prototype of the ruler who would come later.

The followers of Jesus, like all Jews, were familiar with the prophecy of Daniel and its historical fulfillment by Antiochus. When Jesus said to His disciples, “When you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation,” He was conveying to them, in just a few words, a compelling mental picture of what was again going to happen in the future.

In verses 16 through 20 Jesus gave instructions about how people would be able to avoid the terrible circumstances that would occur. The Jews in Judah were to urgently flee to the mountains. When they had the window of opportunity to escape, they were not to take time to pick up anything from their houses. Apparently even the slightest delay would put individuals at risk. Jesus expressed particular concern for certain people. Pregnant women and mothers with nursing children would have unique difficulties in their efforts to escape to the mountains. Winter conditions would further increase the difficulties and discomfort of travel, and the observance of Sabbath restrictions would put escapees in danger.

Verse 21 gives the reason why it was advisable to flee from Jerusalem: there would be “great distress” and unprecedented suffering for the people who remained in the city. Jesus announced that the distress to be endured by the people would be unequalled in human history. We know, from our vantage point 2000 years removed from Jesus’ time, that great numbers of Jews have, at times, been killed: 6 million in the Nazi death camps, and as many as 20 million in the regime of Stalin, but never will there be so high a percentage of people in one location who have been so thoroughly and painfully exterminated as during the future destruction of Jerusalem.

Verse 22 gives us another picture of the severity of the persecution at the end of the age. “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive.” In the Greek language, the words, “no one,” is “all flesh.” They are the words used normally in the New Testament to refer to all mankind. Verse 22 indicates that the human race, which is under the influence of supernatural evil powers, if left to itself without the overseeing sovereign authority of God, will self-destruct.

However, Jesus said that the situation would not go that far. He said that “the days would be shortened for the sake of the elect.” In the context, the “elect” of God comprise the followers of Jesus and the Jewish people. The “elect” are those who have been chosen to be members of God’s family, to have a special relationship with Him either through faith in Jesus or through covenant. The number of the “elect” at the end of the age will be few because many of them will fall away and become apostate and many will be killed. Jesus assured His disciples then, and us today, that there will still be some “elect” on earth when He returns, and that this will be possible only because of the sovereign intervention of God.

Verse 22 connects back to the verse in last week's message in which Jesus said, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved." Jesus clarified that statement with the words, "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened."

To which days did Jesus refer? Jesus was referring to the final days of the present age. For 2000 years, this present age has had an abundance of false prophets, wars, famines, and persecution, and, as the end of the age approaches, the conditions will become much more intense, so much so that no one will survive unless the length of this present age is cut short.

Jesus predicted that there would appear false Christs and false prophets. He said that they would have the ability to "perform great signs and miracles." The intent of these individuals will be "to deceive even the elect" — "deceive everyone, even the elect." The words, "if that were possible," refers to the intent of the false Christs and prophets. The words in the original Greek do not imply that they will be successful.

Jesus assumed that His followers would heed His words of warning and would ignore the deceivers regardless of how impressive their signs and miracles might be. He was fore-warning His followers so they would be fore-armed against deception.

Jesus did not want His followers to pay attention to any premature reports of His appearing. He would not appear in any isolated area, nor in a secret location. There would be no reason for His followers to go searching for Him. In contrast to the appearance of false Christs, Jesus wanted His disciples, and that includes us, to know that His coming will be sudden, public, unmistakable, and recognizable by every individual, just like a brilliant flash of lightning.

Here, finally, was the answer to another of the disciples' questions, "What will be the sign of your coming?" The truth is, there will be no single obvious sign preceding the actual coming of Jesus. Jesus said that the "gospel of the kingdom would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all people groups" before the end would come, and He pointed out several trends in the present age which would precede His coming, but He did not provide the disciples then, nor us now, with any specific concrete sign to signal His arrival. As we said last week, believers are not to look for such signs because Jesus was not going to provide any for us.

However, notice that this passage ends with a proverb which suggests that believers can be aware that the end of the age might be near. Just as a gathering of vultures indicates a carcass, the increase in the number of false Christs and prophets and other workers of evil would be an indication that the end was near. The “elect,” made up of Jesus’ obedient and faithful followers, would have a general idea of the time by being aware of the conditions.

Verses 4 through 28 cover one time period, the present age. Verses 15 through 22 are focused on one part of this present age, the very last days. In Matthew chapter 24 Jesus provided a lot of important information for His followers. We need to pay attention to His words of warning and encouragement.

Jesus wants us to be aware that this world we live in will become more and more hostile to believers. We, in the USA, have been spared, so far, the intensity of persecution with which believers in other areas of the world are faced on a daily basis. Just to give you an idea of what is happening, there have been more Christian martyrs in the past century than in all the previous nineteen centuries since Pentecost. Evil conditions are increasing! The pressures on the followers of Jesus are becoming more intense. If you have been keeping up with the trends in the USA, you know that believers in this nation will undoubtedly face more persecution in the future. Believers more and more find themselves on the wrong side of majority opinions on many issues.

Jesus was well aware of what His followers would have to endure. We need not be unduly alarmed when His predictions are fulfilled. In fact, in a bizarre sort of way, negative circumstances can serve to affirm our faith in Him. Regardless of the adversities ahead, He expects us to stand firm to the end. Verse 13 is the main takeaway in Matthew 24.