

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message Be Ready, He's Coming

Scripture Matthew 24:29-44

Jesus is the eternal Son of God, but there was a period of time in which He took on flesh and dwelled among humanity. That incarnational period of Jesus ended with His return to the glories of heaven. The physical departure of Jesus from earth is described by Luke in the early verses of the Acts of the Apostles. He wrote that Jesus was taken up before the eyes of the disciples, “and a cloud hid him from their sight,” and, as the disciples “were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’” (*Acts 1:9-11*).

Today we will think about the return of Jesus to earth — the event on which the hopes of all of God’s people are set. In the Apostles’ Creed we affirm that Jesus “ascended into heaven where,” at the present time, “He sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty,” awaiting the time when “He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

The return of Jesus to earth has been an important theme in the minds of Jesus’ disciples through the centuries. They have had a variety of opinions about how and when it will occur, and no end to their debates about the topic. Fortunately, New Testament writers like Paul and Peter and John provided explanations and descriptions which have helped to enlighten us and to encourage us to keep up our hope for that climatic moment in human history.

Unfortunately, even those New Testament writers did not provide us with all the information we think we need to back up our opinions and assumptions about the end of the age. The truth is, God has consistently surprised humanity by His unanticipated merciful and miraculous actions, and I am certain that there are more great surprises in store for us in the days ahead.

The lengthy teaching in Matthew chapters 24 and 25 was given by Jesus in response to two specific questions asked by His disciples: “When will the temple be destroyed,” and “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age.” In my opinion, Jesus provided the disciples with answers which were appropriate to their level of understanding. In other words, He kept His answers as “uncomplicated” and straight-forward as possible.

In the first 28 verses of Matthew 24, Jesus described the general trends of the present age, and then the conditions which would prevail toward the end of the age. We also learned that Jesus wanted His followers to understand the difficulties they would face because of their identification with Him. He wanted them to remain faithful to Him, to death if necessary, no matter their circumstances.

In verses 29 through 31 Jesus described the phenomena which would accompany His return.

Read Matthew 24:29-31

The happenings described in these verses will occur “immediately after the distress of those days.” Jesus began talking about the “distress of the present age” back in verse 4. He said that the deceivers who would appear, and the wars and natural disasters which would occur, would be just the “beginning of birth-pains,” and, as He continued His explanation, He made it clear that the pains to be endured by both people in the world and especially by believers, would become more intense in the more distant future.

The descriptive phrases in verse 29 were used frequently in the Old Testament to describe chaos, judgment, war, and devastation. For example, Isaiah 13 has these words: “See, the day of the LORD is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light” (*Isaiah 13:9-10*). In Isaiah 34 there is a verse which states: “all the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree” (*Isaiah 34:4*).

Other Old Testament prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, and Zechariah, also used such language to describe what God was going to do to the enemies of Israel and even to disobedient Israelites themselves. This kind of language was familiar to the disciples. That is why Jesus used references from the Old Testament.

Verse 30 indicates that another sign will also appear in the sky at the same time as the natural phenomena — this will be the sign of the Son of Man. There are a lot of opinions about the meaning of this verse. However, the simplest, most uncomplicated interpretation is that the presence of Jesus will be revealed in the midst of all the other attention grabbing phenomena. Everyone's attention will be focused upward toward the sun, moon, stars, and other heavenly bodies, but Jesus will become the center of attention. He will descend in the clouds in similar fashion to His ascension, and every person will see Him.

There is another acceptable interpretation. The word translated “sign” can also refer to the banner, ensign, or standard that would identify a military cohort. The Old Testament prophets used this imagery in their warnings to Israel. For example, Isaiah described the day when the Lord would reach out to reclaim His people from their places of exile. He wrote, “He (the Lord) will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel” (*Isaiah 11:12*). Since the banner was usually associated with some kind of victory, this would fit the context of verse 30 perfectly. Jesus, the King, was returning to earth, victorious over death and evil, and ready to establish righteousness on earth as it exists in heaven, and His banner would be lifted high for everyone to see.

Jesus stated that “all the nations of the earth would mourn when they see Him coming on the clouds.” The Old Testament informs us that the mourning of the tribes of Israel will be in repentance. The prophet Zechariah wrote: “They will look upon me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a first-born son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great” (*Zechariah 12:10-11*).

The mourning of evildoers will be because of despair, not repentance. Evildoers will be shocked and frightened by the unique display of power and glory. Because of their rebellious defiance of God they will have no expectation of His mercy. The book of Revelation describes their reaction to the sight of the Son of Man: "They will call to the mountains and the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb" (*Revelation 6:16*).

For believers, the sights and sounds associated with the return of Jesus will be the cause of rejoicing. For them, the return of Jesus will mean that the time of intense persecution and distress will be ended. The loud trumpet call will represent victory over sin and the beginning of their long hoped-for time with Jesus. As the elect who survive to the end of the age, they will be gathered by angels from every part of the planet and will, from that point on, be forever with the Lord Jesus.

Jesus completed His response to the disciples' questions with verse 31. However, He continued to give instruction about the end of the age, particularly emphasizing the need for His followers to be always watchful and prepared for His return. Beginning in verse 32 there are six parables. Each parable adds information so that the listeners will understand what it means to be ready. The first three of the parables are very short. We will think about them now.

Read Matthew 24:32-44

The meaning of the parable of the fig tree is obvious. Jesus wanted His disciples to be discerning of the times in which they lived and aware of their circumstances. He has the same desire for us. In the same way that the buds and emerging leaves of the fig tree are an indication of the approaching summer season, the conditions on earth will be an indication to the discerning believer that the end of the age is near.

The phrase, "all these things," refers to all the information Jesus had given in verses 4 through 28. It refers to the distresses of the present age. The disciples who were with Jesus began to experience "all these things" immediately after Pentecost. After them, every generation of believers through the centuries has experienced "these things." And, as we have learned, there will be an increase in the intensity of "these things" as the end of the age draws nearer.

Jesus said that the generation of His listeners would not pass away until “all these things” come to pass. There are a lot of ideas about what these words in verse 34 mean. In my opinion, there are only two good interpretations, and it is possible that Jesus was deliberately ambiguous about which meaning was correct. The words, “this generation shall not pass away,” clearly refers to the generation of the disciples who were with Jesus. Most of the disciples would live for at least 40 more years, and, in their ministry efforts, they would experience all the pains and difficulties that Jesus talked about in verses 4 through 21. In particular, they would have to deal with the opposition of the Jews and the political power of Rome. They would be alive when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed.

The verb at the end of verse 34 can refer to the beginning of an action. All verse 34 demands is that the kinds of distresses mentioned in verses 4 through 28 begin to happen within the lifetimes of the disciples’ generation. Verse 34 does not mean that the present age will come to an end in that generation. We can recognize that what began about 30 AD has not yet reached complete fulfillment, even today. This present age is now at 2000 years and counting.

The second interpretation is based on another meaning of the word “generation.” The word can refer to a people group or race of people. This definition has nothing to do with any period of time. It is possible that Jesus was saying that the Jewish people would continue to survive until the end of human history. This is a remarkable promise given the significant hatred which has been directed toward the Jewish people through the centuries.

The Apostle Paul acknowledged the mercy of God in preserving the descendants of Abraham. This preservation of a “remnant chosen by (God’s) grace” is the main topic in chapter 11 of Paul’s letter written to the members of the Roman church. God is committed to the Jewish people until the end of the age because of His promises to the patriarchs of the Old Testament, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their descendants will survive until the end of the age.

The reference to God's word is a natural lead-in to the statement in verse 35. God will never go back on His promises. Because of His character, God's promises are "irrevocable" (*Romans 11:28-29*). Jesus pointed out that heaven and earth might seem solid and permanent, but, in reality, they are more transitory and undependable than the words He was speaking to them. The words of Jesus would endure forever. The disciples then, and believers today, need to accept the fact that Jesus' words concerning the future will come true and that we must obediently act on them in spite of any difficult circumstances which might surround us.

In verses 36 through 44 the primary emphasis is on the watchfulness and preparedness required of the followers of Jesus. Non-believers will fail to recognize their perilous situation until it is too late. The people in Noah's time were carrying on their normal activities "up to the day Noah entered the ark; they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away." That is remarkable since Noah worked on the ark for 120 years and the Apostle Peter wrote that he was a "preacher of righteousness" during those years (*II Peter 2:5*). Noah's spectators and listeners refused to heed what he was saying and doing. They continued to go through the routines of life, "eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage," ignoring the signs and warnings of approaching doom. Jesus said that this was a picture of the attitudes and behaviors of most people just before His sudden appearance.

We have previously mentioned that the present age is filled with distress — such as famines, earthquakes, and wars. It is remarkable how life continues on with a degree of normalcy in spite of personal difficulties. For non-believers, the return of Jesus will be completely unexpected and sudden. Of two men working side by side in a field, one will be taken, perhaps by the angels, the other left behind to be confronted with the wrath of God. Of two women grinding grain at a mill, one will be taken and the other left. Jesus used these two illustrations to indicate the suddenness by which people will be separated.

Unanticipated and sudden. For non-believers, the return of Jesus will be without warning. Only the Father knows when it will happen. Neither the angels of heaven nor Jesus Himself knows. One of the characteristics of the incarnate humanity of Jesus was His complete dependence on the Father to guide His actions and His words, and apparently that dependence included only the information that the Father wanted Jesus to have at that time. Like all other humans, the incarnate Jesus did not know when the end of the age would occur.

The application of the parables is verse 42. The first word in verse 42 is “therefore.” It has the meaning of “because of this,” — because the date of the Lord’s return is unknown, therefore the followers of Jesus must be watchful. Previously, in the lesson of the fig tree, Jesus said that His followers would be able to discern, in a very general way, the approaching end of the age. He did not specify a particular date, but He wanted them to be increasingly vigilant.

Watchfulness is not a passive activity. Believers have spiritual service and responsibilities to discharge each day of their lives. The point is that believers must live each day with the attitude that it could be the last day. The question we need to ask ourselves frequently is: If Jesus were to return today, would He be pleased with what I am doing?

Believers are required to be prepared in addition to being watchful. Jesus stated that the house owner would be prepared for the thief if he knew when the thief was going to break into the house. The implication is that it was impossible for the house owner to know this, and, therefore, he had to be ready at all times. In the same way, believers can’t know when the Son of Man will come, and so, they must be ready at all hours.

The key verses in Matthew 24 are, first,

“He who stands firm to the end will be saved,” and second,

“Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”