

The Destruction of Jerusalem

MATTHEW 23:37-24:34

**Baxter T. Exum (#1274)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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It would be very safe to say that the world around us seems to be in a state of chaos. In fact, at least one online blogger came out this week with a quote from Matthew 24:6 and suggested (based on current events) that the end is near, and the suggestion came with the quote from Jesus, the prophecy that his people would ***“hear of wars and rumors of wars.”*** If you have kept up with the news this week, then you know that we are back to bombing Iraq. The author pointed to the Ebola outbreak in western Africa, the various genocides being carried out by Islamic extremists around the world, the intensifying conflict in Israel, the escalating conflict with Russia and China right now, the American border crisis, the impending economic collapse, widespread sexual sin, the deterioration of marriage itself, the abortion holocaust, the increasing persecution of Christianity around the world, and on and on and on. And according to this particular author, it seems that perhaps the end is near. On top of this, the author points out that the world itself seems aligned against Israel. Even the United States is now providing millions of our tax dollars to a Palestinian government that is supported by Hamas, a terrorist organization currently firing rockets into some of the most populated parts of Israel. And the author of this particular article looked at that and quoted the words of Jesus, ***“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near”*** (Luke 21:20). And in light of everything that seems to be happening around us, even some Christians may get caught up in some of that discouragement. In fact, as I pointed out last Sunday morning, one of our guests at here at this congregation was just asking, “What does the Bible teach concerning the signs that the end is near?”

And so today, I would like for us to get back to that question. Last week, of course, we gave some background material. In Matthew 23, we find that Jesus is making his way to the cross, and once he makes it to the city of Jerusalem, he addresses the Jewish leaders. And in Matthew 23, the Lord gives a series of “woes” on the scribes and the Pharisees. Last Sunday’s lesson is now on the website, so I would encourage you to go back to that if you want a more in-depth review. But in summary, those Jewish leaders who should have been pointing people to Jesus as the Messiah were instead turning people away from the kingdom of God, primarily through their hard-hearted and stubborn hypocrisy. And toward the end of last week’s passage, we started seeing some clues as to what was going to happen next. In Matthew 23:32, for example, Jesus spoke to these men and said, ***“Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.”*** In other words, the cup of God’s wrath was nearly full. Judgment was just around the corner. And then in the last verse we studied last Lord’s Day, the Lord said in verse 36, ***“Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”*** In other words, because they were in the process of rejecting Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus said that the end was near.

With this as background, we pick up this morning with Matthew 23:37 (p. 1544). This morning, as we work our way down through Matthew 24:34, I want us to take this passage in sections.

I. And I'd like for us to start with the Lord's **POWERFUL WARNING** (23:37 – 24:2).

If you will, please look with me at Matthew 23:37 – 24:2,

³⁷ ***"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. ³⁸ Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! ³⁹ For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is HE who comes in the name of the Lord!'"***

¹ ***Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. ² And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."***

And so we have an urgent, and yet at the same time, compassionate, warning. ***"Jerusalem, Jerusalem!"*** The Lord was calling out one more time here, begging the nation to turn back from God's wrath that was just over the horizon. Over and over again, the Jewish people had murdered God's prophets, and now they are just a few days away from murdering the Son of God. And here, the Son of God would just love to protect these people from what is about to happen. In verse 37, Jesus wants to gather them all together the way a hen might do with those chicks, and yet the people of Jerusalem would have nothing of it. They were ***"unwilling,"*** the Lord said. And so he says, ***"Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!"*** The end is near.

And then, as we move over into Chapter 24, Jesus is leaving the temple, and as he leaves, the disciples are just in awe of the huge buildings. If you remember: These guys were from the country. For the most part, the disciples were fishermen. For the most part, they came from up near Galilee. As I have said before, I picture Galilee kind of like Lodi – they don't have big buildings up there. And so the disciples are like those from the country who visit the city of Chicago for the very first time. They come out of the train station, and they're just walking around looking up. They're not even watching where they're going. And in Mark's account, the disciples were saying to Jesus, ***"Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"*** In other words, these country preachers were totally in awe of these huge buildings in the big city. The Lord, though, is not impressed. And the Lord responds, ***"Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."*** And so in this passage we have a warning. The warning is full of compassion, but the warning is also urgent. Because the nation of Israel had rejected Jesus as the Son of God, because they had continued to kill God's prophets and messengers, the cup of God's wrath was about to overflow, and the divine wrath would be poured out in a very focused way on the city of Jerusalem, on the temple in particular, and it would happen to that generation. This warning was for those who were standing right there as Jesus spoke those words for the very first time. For them, the end was near.

II. Well, at this point, the disciples are pretty much in shock. They keep walking. They make their way to the Mount of Olives, just outside the city, and the disciples come to Jesus with at least **TWO QUESTIONS**.

Notice, please, what these men were thinking – this is Matthew 24:3, ***"As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be***

the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” To understand what they are asking here, we need to have some idea of what these people thought about the temple. To them, the temple was permanent. To them, the temple was Jerusalem. To them, the temple meant everything. It was a massive and beautiful building. The only thing I can even try to compare it to today would be the capitol building here in Madison. We can hardly imagine the capitol being torn down by enemy soldiers. We can hardly imagine the capitol building being taken apart stone by stone. But even the capitol building is not really a good comparison, because the temple was not just a sign of their nation, it was also the foundation of their faith. The temple is the place where they went to meet God. The temple is where God came down. The temple is the place where sins were forgiven.

So, when Jesus speaks of a time when ***“not one stone here will be left upon another,”*** the disciples assume that Jesus is talking not just about the fall of Jerusalem, but about the end of the world as well. In their minds, all of this is rolled up into one horrific event, and they want to know more, so they just blurt it out, ***“Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”*** In other words, they wanted to know WHEN all of these terrible things would happen. To them, the destruction of the temple, the Lord’s return, and the end of the age were all wrapped up in one. In reality, though, the disciples were really asking two questions.

III. And so, in the rest of Matthew 24, Jesus goes on to answer both questions, starting with the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs that would come, warning them that **THE FALL OF JERUSALEM IS VERY NEAR.**

And again, Jesus starts by answering the question about the temple. They wanted to know when ***“these things”*** would happen, they wanted to know the ***“signs,”*** and so the Lord starts by dealing with this part of it first. Notice, please, Matthew 24:4-34,

⁴ And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. ⁵ For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many. ⁶ You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. ⁸ But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. ¹⁰ At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. ¹² Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. ¹⁴ This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.

¹⁵ “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. ¹⁸ Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. ¹⁹ But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! ²⁰ But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until

now, nor ever will. ²² Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There He is,' do not believe him. ²⁴ For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ Behold, I have told you in advance. ²⁶ So if they say to you, 'Behold, He is in the wilderness,' do not go out, or, 'Behold, He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe them. ²⁷ For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

²⁹ "But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. ³¹ And He will send forth His angels with A great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

³² "Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; ³³ so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. ³⁴ Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Now I know there is a lot of information in this section, but I do want us to at least hit the highlights and cover some key thoughts here. As he answered this first question about the destruction of the temple and the signs that would take place leading up to this event, I would point out here at the beginning that the signs were for a reason, and the main reason Jesus is telling these people what to look for is found in verse 16. In verse 16, Jesus is saying: When you see these things happening, run for the hills! I want to ask: If all of these signs refer to the end of the world (as some people say that they do), if all of these signs point to the Judgment Day, then what good will it do to run for the hills? It doesn't make sense to apply the first half of this chapter to the Judgment Day. Instead, as we have noticed several times up to this point, these are things that were going to happen to that generation, to those who heard these words for the very first time. And when we look at it this way, the chapter starts to make a lot more sense.

Think about running for the hills. Normally, at that time, if a foreign army was approaching, what would people do? 2000 years ago, if you were out in the fields and saw a foreign army coming over the horizon, what would you do? Well, we would make a run for the city. People would try to get inside the city walls. They would go to the city for protection. Jesus, though, told his followers to make a run for it – run away from the city, run for the mountains, run for the hills. In verses 17-20, running is emphasized again – if you're on the housetop, don't go down, just run. If you're on the field, don't go back to get your coat, just run. Woe on those who are pregnant or nursing, because running will be more difficult. Pray that it doesn't happen in the winter or on a Sabbath. And the reason the Lord emphasizes running is: Jesus knows that the city itself was about to get leveled. History tells us that Christians did, in fact, flee, and history tells us that not a single Christian died in the Roman assault on the city of Jerusalem. They saw it coming, they were warned, and they listened to the warning.

And with this in mind, we look at some of those signs that they were told to look out for – one of those that people try to apply today comes in verse 6, ***"wars and rumors of wars."*** A hundred years ago, WWI broke out, and people said, "The end is near!" Then, WWII broke out, "The end is near!" Korea, "The end is near!"

Vietnam, “The end is near!” Iraq, “The end is near!” 9-11, “The end is near!” Over the last few weeks, Israel is being fired upon once again, “The end is near!” But no! We are no longer in the **“generation”** Jesus referred to in verse 34. Instead, in those years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, wars did, in fact, increase in that area. It was a turbulent time.

At the end of verse 7, Jesus warns of **“famines and earthquakes.”** And again, we know from history that there was a surge of famines and earthquakes in Israel leading up to what happened in 70 AD. In the Bible itself, we think of the famine predicted by Agabus in Acts 11:28, the famine that caused Paul to collect money from various Gentile congregations to be sent back to Jerusalem. In verses 9-10, Jesus refers to a surge in persecution. And again, we think of what happened to the early Christians. We think of what happened to Paul under emperor Nero. In verse 11, Jesus refers to a surge in false prophets. Over and over again in Paul’s letters and in the other New Testament letters, Bible writers had to deal with the threat false teachers. Sometimes even names are given. In verse 14, Jesus says that the gospel has to be preached to the whole world before this terrible thing happens. And again, we find that the gospel is preached to the whole world by the time we get to Colossians 1, a passage that was written in roughly 60 AD.

In verses 29-31, the Lord starts speaking in apocalyptic language. Some have a hard time with this, “Oh, this must be literal. Stars haven’t fallen. We haven’t seen the Son of Man coming in the clouds, yet. So, this must be something that is still on the horizon.” And yet, that is not the case. In fact, we have similar language in the Old Testament referring to the fall of other cities. There are several, but if you want to write one down in the margin of your Bible out beside verse 29, I would write “Isaiah 13:10.” In Isaiah 13:1, the Bible says, **“The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.”** In other words, the prophecy is clearly about Babylon. Well, the chapter continues, and in verse 10 the prophecy says, **“For the stars of heaven and the constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light.”** Jesus, therefore, was using similar language here, and God’s people (hopefully) would have figured this out (and they did). When the faithful paid attention to Jesus talking like this, the message would have been clear, “Ah, the Lord is saying that Jerusalem will fall just like Babylon fell, just like all of those other nations who fell when similar things were said about them.”

And then, in verse 34, we have the reminder that **“this generation”** (those men standing there that day) would not pass away until all these things are accomplished. All of these signs, therefore, were intended to warn these listeners, to warn them to run for the hills when they saw these things start to happen. I don’t want to cut into next week’s lesson, but if you believe in marking in your Bible, I would suggest putting a line right between verses 35-36. Do you see it there? Concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, there were signs. But then in verse 36 the Lord switches gears. He goes back to their second question concerning the end of the age, and the Lord says, **“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”** For the destruction of Jerusalem there signs, but concerning the end of the world, nobody knows that date, not even Jesus, but only the Father. And for that event there would be no warning, and that is what I would like for us to study next week, if the Lord wills, of course.

IV. As we end, though, I want to just touch on WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED TO THE CITY OF JERUSALEM.

History tells us that roughly 1.1 million Jews were killed and nearly 90,000 were taken captive to be marched through the streets of Rome in shame. Starting in 44 AD, King Agrippa died, and the area was returned to direct Roman rule – ruled directly by a Roman governor. They were forced to pay tribute to the Emperor. Resentment grew. In 66 AD, the priests refused to make their sacrifices to the Roman Emperor, the Jews

began to revolt, Rome sent reinforcements to squash the rebellion, the Jews (surprisingly) pushed the Romans back. Rome, embarrassed that the Jews had basically defeated the most powerful army on earth, decided to take no chances, and Rome came back with a vengeance. They sent Vespasian, a hard battle-proven veteran, to lead the Roman troops against Jerusalem. Thousands were massacred. In the middle of all of this, Vespasian was called back to Rome to be the new Emperor, so he appointed his oldest son Titus to be responsible for basically flattening Jerusalem. Titus came in with four legions of soldiers, including the legion that had been driven back by the Jews just a few years earlier. These men came in ready to settle a score. Titus attacked and surrounded the city (where most people had fled). I say “most people,” because the Christians did not flee to the city; instead, they ran for the hills! Those trapped inside, however, soon started starving to death. Mothers ate their own children. On August 29, AD 70, the Roman army broke into the temple compound. Thousands more were killed, the temple itself was set on fire, thousands more were crucified and tortured. History tells us that during this time, as people tried to escape the city, the Romans were crucifying approximately 500 people every single day. Forests were decimated as they harvested trees for all of those crucifixions. Rumor had it that the great stones of the temple were held together with rods made of solid gold. I want you to imagine those soldiers surrounding the city, just sitting there and waiting. They could barely see over the walls, and what they could see was this giant, absolutely beautiful building. The soldiers, therefore, as soon as they broke into the temple compound, they took the temple apart stone by stone, looking for that gold – ***“not one stone was left on top of another,”*** just as the Lord had said would happen.

At that point, it became obvious to the world that the Jewish system had come to an end – no more temple, no more priesthood, no more records – as I understand it, Jews today pretty much have no idea what tribe they are from. All of that was destroyed in 70 AD. In other words, they cannot reinstate the Levitical priesthood even if they wanted to. Today, nobody knows who the Levites are. One of the articles I’m passing out this morning summarizes it this way, “All that remained was the silence of a people who at one time were the chosen people of God, but now were rejected by the very God they once served” [Raymond Allen Hagood].

A year later, Titus returned to Rome as a conquering hero. He brought with him those slaves that were captured along with the loot from the temple itself. I know some of you here this morning have been to Rome. You can see all of us here about 7 years ago, and we are fully prepared to deploy the camp chicken at every possible opportunity. Some of you have been here as well, and if you have been to the Coliseum, then you have also seen the Arch of Titus. The Arch of Titus is just off the left side of this picture. I went to Google to put this in perspective, and the yellow circle up here shows you where it is. As you can see, it is pretty much right in the middle of ancient Rome. The Arch of Titus was built to honor Titus and his victory over the Jewish people. To me, besides worshiping with the Lord’s church in Rome, this was one of the highlights of our trip, because when you walk under the arch, you can see the carvings depicting the Roman soldiers carrying those sacred items out of the temple. This gives us the big picture of the carvings underneath the arch, and even in these two pictures, you can see some of what those soldiers are carrying. But I would zoom in just a little bit. Do you see the Menorah, the seven golden lampstands from the temple? Do you see the table of showbread? The table of showbread is the square over on the right. Do you see the silver trumpets that were used to call people to worship? The silver trumpets are crossed in front of the table of showbread.

We are looking at the Arch of Titus for a reason. These soldiers are pictured here doing exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ warned about in the first half of Matthew 24. Because of the scribes and the Pharisees, because the Jewish people were in the process of rejecting God’s final offer, Jesus said that the end (for them, at least) was very near. It was right around the corner. It would happen within a generation. And there were signs for the true people of God (the Christians) to watch out for so that they would not get caught up in the violence.

Conclusion:

Again, next week I would love for us to move forward with the rest of this chapter as the Lord goes on to answer their second question. But for now, we have a powerful testimony concerning the truth of God's word. Jesus said that not one stone would be left upon another, and that is exactly what happened. The lesson for us is: God keeps his promises. And the bottom line for us is: God has told us what to do to be saved, and he has told us that there is a Day of Judgment coming. We do not know when. Again, we will look at that next week. But for now, that is what we need to know. And God's plan is that we look at the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins and that we let that sacrifice touch our hearts. We see what he did, we read the scriptures, and we start to realize that we have sinned. To be saved, we must turn away from sin. We must allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. If you have any questions, let us know. If we need to pray about something on your behalf, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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