

Title: He's Coming Back!!!
Date: February 28, 2021
Subject: Walking with Jesus Christ to the cross, empty tomb and beyond: Tuesday in private
Scripture: Matthew 24:23 - 31

For the disciples, it was a beautiful day in the neighborhood as they were leaving the temple compound on a glorious Tuesday afternoon to spend the rest of day in private with Jesus. He'd just soundly and roundly defeated and silenced the malevolent religious leaders. The disciples, feeling in a good mood, saw the temple in its beauty and called it to his attention.

Or the disciples may have been so stunned by what they'd seen and heard Jesus do and say, including the part about "your house is left to you desolate," that they didn't know how to react. They saw the temple as a conversation piece and started babbling, "Um. Hey Jesus. Look at these really nice stones that are up here."

The Teacher bluntly told them, "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2).

The disciples felt like Jesus was playing a game of "stump the disciples." There's no doubt they were dumbfounded at this statement. When they got to the Mount of Olives, they asked, "Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3).

Three questions masked as one: 1) When will the temple be destroyed? 2) What will indicate your coming to fulfill the promise? (They likely thought the temple's destruction meant him coming as the political Messiah, not yet understanding he was leaving and coming back at a later time.) The third question points to the end of time. They figured while they were asking questions, they might as well throw in one about the end.

The teaching Jesus gave to answer the questions and beyond, came to be known as the Olivet Discourse because of where it was delivered. He assures them the temple will come down, along with the city being destroyed, though he doesn't give the day. It would take place in less than 40 years. Most of his teaching is about the signs of his coming and the end of time. The two are closely related.

The passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke are meticulously studied to gain insight. Part of the difficulty is the words of Christ don't necessarily provide a chronology of events and they don't necessarily address the disciples' questions in the order they were asked. There's also repetition. Commentator Matthew Henry, "What Christ here said to his disciples, tended more to promote caution than to satisfy their curiosity; more to prepare them for the events that should happen, than to give a distinct idea of the events."

It's interesting and intriguing and baffling that people can read the same passages and come up with different views about Christ's return to earth, specifically as it applies to when he gathers his followers in relation to the seven-year tribulation.

There are four main views. The first is pretribulation rapture. Jesus removes his followers before God's wrath is unleashed. The second is mid-tribulation. Jesus comes during the middle-ish part of the tribulation,

maybe even right in the exact middle at the 3 1/2 year point. The third is post-trib. Jesus allows his believers to go through the wrath of humans and God and then takes out his people. The fourth is pan-trib where people basically say we don't really know when the rapture will take place, but it's all going to pan out in the end.

Some might like to ignore this topic or not talk and think about it because it means the end of this life and the future is relatively unknown. We can't avoid it as it's how Jesus spends the rest of Tuesday, speaking at length. Luke has 29 verses, Mark 33 and Matthew 94. It's the great hope of the believer, our great hope.

READ Matthew 24:23 – 31.

You've probably noticed that whatever version you're using, we broke into the middle of a paragraph. We need to understand the original text didn't come with paragraphs or verse and chapter breaks. This seems to be a natural break in Jesus' teaching. The words "at that time" don't necessarily mean the events of the upcoming verses immediately follow what just preceded them. Jesus is talking about the time when he returns.

I. There will be deceivers

A. Their presence. The period leading up to the second coming of Jesus Christ will be marked by deception. There'll be false Christs and prophets who will seduce people with their message, their false claims. Some false Christs seek to deliver oppressed people while others are after fame and stature. Some are peaceful while others resort violence and oppression to keep followers. Some raise a large following and leave a lasting legacy while others fade into obscurity.

Since the time of Christ, there've been hundreds if not thousands of pretenders to the throne. One of the first was a guy named Theudas who came on the scene within 15 years of Christ's death. He promised to divide the Jordan River so his followers could cross. When they assembled for the miracle, Roman soldiers massacred many and captured others. The first century historian Josephus reported there were numerous false Christs and prophets between time of Christ's resurrection and the overthrow of the temple in 70AD.

Notable names of recent history who've proclaimed themselves to be Christ include Jim Jones, founder of Jonestown, and Rev. Moon of the Unification Church. At this moment there are false Messiahs prowling the earth. Alan John Miller, an Australian who founded Divine Truth, says he's the reincarnated Jesus of Nazareth. Vissarion, born Sergey Anatolyevitch Torop, was a Red Army soldier and then a traffic cop. He was let go and points to that moment as the time when he realized he was reborn as the returned Jesus Christ. His new name means "he who gives life."

B. Their power. Deceivers will have incredible ability to perform great signs and miracles. Signs are messages that point to something, in this case, the claim the person is the Christ or his spokesperson. They're supposed evidence of the truthfulness of what's being said or done. Miracles are the performed wonders. They may be magic tricks. More likely they're miracles energized by the devil.

The Lord God of the Scripture isn't the only one who possesses the ability to perform miracles. I saw a picture of a Satanist in The Philippines. He took an arrow, pushed it through one cheek, through the mouth and out the other cheek... and there was no blood. Satan has the ability to perform some supernatural things.

C. Their message. False Christs and false prophets proclaim they have additional information, supplements from God. They entice people with what they say is “new and improved.” There’re also replacement Christs who develop other belief systems to counter Christianity. There are over 4000 different belief systems, religious constructs, church affiliations, faith groups, movements, etc. Some would be truly Christian, but most aren’t.

The deception in the text concerns Christ’s return to earth. Some will claim to be the Christ who has returned. Others will serve as messengers proclaiming Christ has returned. They’ll say he’s out in the desert or in some secret inner chamber and people need to go there. Many false Christs have led their people into a desert or secluded location or a compound where they aren’t as easily observed.

These deceivers will be persuasively smooth talkers. They appeal to the yearning of the soul, to have all the sorrow, all the pain and all the suffering over. They claim it’s possible because Jesus has already come back. It seems to shout good news. Glory! Hallelujah!

D. Their effect. These false messengers will deceive many and blind them to the truth. They’re so persuasive it seems they might have the ability to deceive even the elect, those who are chosen by God to be his children and truly belong to him. Albert Barnes on the statement in Matthew 24:24: “*If it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect* - So nearly would their pretended miracles resemble true miracles as to render it difficult to detect the imposture; so much so, that if it were possible, they would persuade even true Christians that they were the Messiah. But that was not possible. His real friends would be too firmly established in the belief that he was the Christ to be wholly led away by others. Christians may be sometimes led far astray; they may be in doubt about some great doctrines of religion; they may be perplexed by the cavils and cunning craftiness of those who do not love the truth, but they cannot be entirely deceived and seduced from the Saviour. Our Saviour says that if this *were possible*, it would be done then; but it was not possible” (Barnes Notes on the Bible).

John Gill speaking of Christ followers: “They may be, and oftentimes are, deceived after conversion; but then this is in part only, and not totally; in some lesser, and not in the greater matters of faith; not so as to let go their hold of Christ their head, and quit the doctrine of salvation by him, or fall into damnable heresies: they may be seduced from the simplicity of the Gospel, but not finally; for they shall be recovered out of the snare of the devil, and not to be left to perish in such deceivings” (Gill’s Exposition of the Bible).

II. How to react

A. Be warned. Jesus warns us about deceivers. A question might go through our minds: “Why would God allow deceivers?” Great question. It’s similar to “Why does he allow bad things to happen?” The answer is we’re engaged in a battle between Ultimate Good and ultimate evil. Jesus doesn’t promise we’d be immediately ushered into receiving all of his promises the moment we place our trust in him or prior to going to heaven.

B. Be alert. Mark’s account has Jesus twice call his followers to be on their guard (Mark 13:9, 23). It means to look, see, perceive, discern. It’s a soldier standing at his post. He’s in protection mode. He diligently looks at the surroundings to see if there’s trouble. He’s watching out for the attack of the enemy. He’s alert.

We're to be in protection mode. We're to protect ourselves and others from deceiving attacks. To do so, we need to be on the lookout. Use discernment. Have our eyes fixed on Christ and be fixated with him so we can discern counterfeits. Trust in his finished work as shown in the crucifixion and resurrection.

We who are followers of Jesus Christ are to be watching and waiting. This is communicated throughout the Olivet Discourse by the use of the words watch, be on your guard, be alert, keep watch, watch out. Watching isn't idly sitting and gazing up into the heavens. Rather, it involves actively serving. Later in Matthew, Jesus illustrates his meaning by using parables, including one about servants who will be busy with the Master's business until the very end, when the Master returns. They're the ones who'll be commended.

Deception is a trick of the enemy. His army of deceivers are trying to knock us off our foundation of watching for Christ to return, so we won't be diligently serving him.

III. The truth about Christ and his coming

The Lord states his coming will be personal and visible. There won't be any confusion about it. We see this in verse 27 with the illustration of lightning, visible from great distances, from horizon to horizon.

Then he uses a unique illustration about vultures gathering to a carcass. Not the most appetizing, but effective. The idea is dead animals attract attention. Jesus' coming will attract attention.

The imagery continues in verse 30. We again find the phrase "at that time." It doesn't mean it comes after the events of v. 29, but is used in the same way as in v. 23. Christ's coming will have differing effects. Those who reject him and are steadfast in their rejection will see all the signs and wonders and the things that happen afterwards. They will mourn and cry out. However, they won't repent and turn to God.

On the other hand are the elect who belong to God. Jesus will come for them. It'll be a phenomenal spectacle. He'll come with his power and great glory as he rides on the clouds of the sky. He'll send his angels to gather them from wherever they are and bring them to himself. There'll be a loud trumpet call. It sounds like another Scripture: "The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

Verse 29 is a parenthesis. It briefly summarizes what will occur after his coming and the rapture takes place. It's the time of the terrible and unparalleled tribulation when there'll be wrath upon wrath upon wrath poured out upon humanity and the planet.

IV. Reassuring words

Luke ends his account with these words: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:27, 28). It may seem like he's talking about cloud-watching, but he's not. It's an encouragement to be alert and ready. *Stand up*. Take a stand. It's a call to persevere, to persevere in hope, to persevere as we draw closer to the end, to be busy in the Lord's work. *Lift up your heads*. Don't be discouraged and hang your head. Lift it up.

After Jesus gives the parable of the fig tree, he gives this reassurance.

Read Matthew 24:35.

He affirms, confirms and reinforces that his word is constant. What he says can be depended upon. There's no wavering in it. It isn't wishy-washy. In contrast, heaven and earth will one day be a thing of the past, history. This thing that seems so solid, that we walk on, will disappear. Along with it the sun, moon, Jupiter, the Milky Way -- they'll all be gone. In their place the Lord will create a wonderful new heaven and new earth.

But his word will never disappear and doesn't have to be remade. It lasts and lasts and lasts. It's the same yesterday, today and forever because He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). It doesn't change just like his love never changes.

After Luke gives the reassurance from Jesus, we find these words, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap" (Luke 21:34). If we take our focus off the Lord and put it on the circumstances, the way things are happening or not happening on this earth, our hearts can be weighed down. The plea is to "be always on the watch" to which Jesus adds, "Pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen" (Luke 21:36). Prayer can help keep our hearts and mind focused on the Lord.

Jesus said signs like wars, famines, and earthquakes must happen, but the end is still to come (Matthew 24:4 – 8). These are the beginning of birth pains. Compared to a woman who's beginning to feel like the delivery of the child is going to be taking place. Sometimes birth pains can be months ahead of the actual delivery. They're a sign something's happening... but it isn't necessarily the moment. The baby isn't born yet. Jesus said the same thing would happen with events in the world. Wars and deception have been going on since time he left earth. Since then we've been experiencing the beginning of birth pains. The end hasn't happened yet, but one day will. The great delivery.

The main thing is Jesus is coming back. The righteous, those who have a right relationship with him because our trust has been placed in him alone, will be rewarded. Those who do not have a right relationship with him, the unrighteous, will be punished. We don't know the day when the Lord will come (Matthew 24:42). He'll come at an unexpected time (Matthew 24:44). As someone has said, "A map of the future would be a hindrance, and not a help, to faith. Certain signs have been given, but not for the purpose of making detailed, sequential predictions" (NIV Study Bible note on Mark 13:32).

Jesus implores his followers to not give the time of day to any of the false Christs and their claims. Though sometimes we're susceptible to error and wandering, we bank on the fact that the Lord knows those who are at his and knows how to protect his children and keep them from falling.

In the meantime, we're to keep watch, be alert, be busy serving the master and his interests. Then we'll hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness."