

"Back to the Future"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
April 29, 2018
(Mt. 24:1-35)

Introduction.

Do those of you who are old enough remember Y2K? At the turn of the century, everyone was worried about the world shutting down because of the potential inability of computers to make the change when the calendar turned 2000. We're so dependent on computers nowadays to run the infrastructure of the world, and people were afraid that everything would shut down and life as we know it would come to a standstill. Computers would stop, power stations would cease to work, and planes would fall out of the sky. Some even predicted the end of the world.

I remember reading at that time about a cult based in Denver, Colorado, called Concerned Christians. The members of that group moved to Jerusalem so they could be there on January 1, 2000, for the end of the world. These cult members planned to instigate a shootout with police in Jerusalem at the end of the year in an attempt to hasten the return of Christ. Fourteen members of the cult were arrested, and papers were drawn up to deport 11 of the rest of them.

Ever since the invention of the atomic bomb, the end of the world has become a new modern apocalyptic fear. And even more recently concerns about the environment have people wondering about the possibility of the destruction of life as we know it on this planet. Global warming, the rate at which we're polluting the environment, and all the natural disasters that have happened in recent years have many people afraid that the end could be coming sooner than we think. In the midst of all this fear, the Second Coming of Jesus has become the subject of serious conversation. I Googled "the Second Coming of Christ," and it brought up over 8 million results!

We're not alone in our generation with our concern about these matters. Millennial fever was hot 1,000 years ago at the turn of the first millennium, and people then were convinced they were living in the last days, too. And as we learn from our passage this morning, people as far back as those who lived at the time of Jesus have had a keen interest in when the world would end and God's plan for the Second Coming.

As we take a look at this passage, let's look back to the future, so to speak, and see what Jesus had to say about all this.

I. The Question of the Disciples.

We're told in verses 1-3 of our passage that after giving the Sermon of the Seven Woes in Matthew 23, Jesus and His disciples left the Temple and were walking away when the disciples called the Lord's attention to the magnificent buildings. They were awestruck at the beauty and size of the structures, and it's not difficult to understand why. There was nothing quite like the Temple in Jerusalem in the ancient world.

The summit of Mount Zion had been dug away to leave a plateau of 1,000 square feet, and at the far end of it was the Temple itself. It was built with white marble and was plated with gold. When the sun was shining, it was difficult to stare at the Temple because it was so bright. The Temple area was surrounded by great porches, or colonnades, and these porches were held up by large pillars which were cut out of solid blocks of marble. They were 37 ½ feet high and of such a thickness that three men linked together hand-to-hand could barely put their arms around them. At the corners of the Temple, angle stones have been found which measure from 20 to 40 feet in length, and which weigh more than 100 tons. How they were ever cut and placed in position is one of the mysteries of ancient engineering. So, it's no wonder that these Galilean fishermen looked with awe at the buildings and called Jesus' attention to them. They were like hillbillies from the country coming to the big city and standing in amazement at the awesomeness of the sight.

The Lord answered His disciples and said that the day would come when not one of the stones of the Temple would be left standing upon the other. Great as these buildings were, Jesus said they would be completely destroyed. Christ was a prophet, and He predicted the destruction of the Temple, which, in fact, occurred in 70 AD. The Roman general Titus so completely destroyed the Temple that no trace of the stones can be found today, and even the exact location of the Temple is disputed. The only thing that is left is what is called the Wailing Wall on the west side of where the Temple once stood.

After they walked out of the Temple and crossed the Kidron valley to the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked Jesus a two-fold question - *"Tell us when the destruction of the Temple will happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"* (24:3). They figured that anything as cataclysmic, as apocalyptic, as the destruction of the Temple would signal the end of the world. So they were curious about all this.

There is a natural curiosity in all of us about these matters, and it's easy to get caught up in the discussion about when Christ will come again and bring an end to

the world. I can remember when I was in college reading a book entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It was on the *New York Times* best seller list for months, and everyone was reading it. I even started evangelistic Bible studies about the end times when I was in college, and I would try to scare people into the kingdom – the end of the world is coming, are you ready?! I would point to current events of the day and try to demonstrate how they were the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and that Jesus' Second Coming was just around the corner.

In our curiosity about the Second Coming of Christ, we need to be careful that we don't lose sight of what's really important in all of this. As we'll see in a moment, understanding the particulars of the timing of Christ's return is not nearly as important as remaining faithful and persevering in following Jesus until He does in fact return. When the world is buzzing with speculation about these matters and we're naturally curious about the timing of these things, let's not lose sight of what really matters – being faithful to Christ to the end.

II. The Explanation of Jesus.

The answer Jesus gave to the disciples' question reveals a word of caution at the very beginning – "*Watch out that no one deceives you*" (24:4). There's a great possibility for being deceived in any study of the end times. In my case, it was after reading books on the Second Coming, after studying charts on the timing of Christ's return, and after trying to scare people into the kingdom that I then read another book which had a different perspective on these matters. And I came to the conviction that I had been deceived about the end times.

The new book I read was entitled *Is the Bible a Jigsaw Puzzle?* by a Dutchman named T.J. Boersma. It was the first time I had ever read a Reformed, or Presbyterian, approach to interpreting Bible prophecy, and I was shocked to learn that there are several different ways of interpreting the various passages to which people point to "prove" their particular belief regarding the Second Coming of Jesus. And I came to believe that I had been sold a bill of goods.

A careful analysis of Jesus' answer to the disciples' question reveals that they actually asked two separate questions, and Jesus gave two separate answers, though they're interwoven together. And it's difficult to always know which question Jesus was addressing. While the disciples thought that the destruction of the Temple would naturally lead to the end of the world, they were actually two separate events. The destruction of the Temple occurred in 70 AD, but the Lord hasn't returned for now nearly 2,000 years. Some of what Jesus predicted in His explanation had to do with the destruction of the Temple, which has already taken place, and some of His answer had to do with His return, which yet remains to happen.

Let me give you an example. In verses 5-14 Christ's words about the rise of false prophets, the increase of wars, the multiplication of famines and earthquakes, which are sign of the birth pangs that the end is near – all these appear to be references to the events that would lead up to the destruction of the Temple, which Jesus predicted in the verses that follow – verses 15-25. They're not a part of the prophecy concerning the predicted return of Christ. There is a telescoping of the two events, and while they appear to hang together in Jesus' answer as though they refer to the same thing, the Lord actually predicted separate events, and we should be careful not to confuse the two.

In addition, all of the language of apocalyptic literature usually contains obscure and confusing images, such as the one in this passage – the "abomination of desolation." There is a great difference of opinion as to the precise meaning of the words and the images. They are usually rooted in the OT, but rarely are they crystal clear in what they are intended to represent.

The one thing we can know for sure from reading Matthew 24 is that Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and He promised that one day He would return. The rest is a little bit fuzzy, and we would do well not become too caught up in figuring out the precise timing of these things. I wish we had time to walk through the prophecy verse by verse and examine the passage closely, but time does not allow for it this morning. That will have to wait for another study.

III. The Meaning for Us Today.

What does all of this mean for you and me? How are we to apply these truths to our own lives today? If Jesus didn't speak these words on the Mount of Olives in order to give us a jigsaw puzzle whereby we can figure out everything and nail down the day of His return, then what exactly is the purpose of this passage? There are several valuable lessons I think this text teaches regarding the Christian life.

First, this passage reminds us that God has not abandoned this world. For all its evil and all the problems we have, the world is still the setting in which God's purpose is being worked out. Our Lord isn't going to abandon the world. Rather, He's going to redeem it. And we shouldn't be discouraged by the crescendo of evil around us. The Bible reassures us that even a complete breakdown of all moral standards, and when the world seems to be unraveling at the seams, is not just a prelude to destruction. It's also a prelude to re-creation.

Second, this passage reminds us that in the end, God is both just and He is merciful. The passage reminds us of God's judgment, but it also reminds us of His mercy. There will be a day of reckoning, but it will also be a day of grace and

the newness of life. History isn't simply circular. It's going somewhere, and there is a purpose and a destination in the mind of God.

And *finally*, this passage, and others like it that speak of the return of Christ, remind us that in the end God wins. No matter how bleak things may appear at the present time, no matter how often good is trampled and evil succeeds, and no matter how many times injustice happens and love is crucified, the promise of Christ's return assures us that in the end our God will overcome. The game ain't over yet, and God's getting ready to come to bat.

One day He will set things right, He will settle the score, and He will return in glory to claim His own and make a new heaven and a new earth, where every knee shall bow and every tongue confess and Jesus Christ is Lord! And in the meantime, you and I are called to hang in there. Perseverance is the test of reality in the Christian life, and the Bible tells us that He who endures to the end will be saved.

In his excellent commentary on Matthew, NT scholar Dale Bruner writes: "Jesus' [Olivet Discourse] does not intend to create apocalyptic seers, it intends to create spiritual and moral long-distance runners. It does not so much give disciples supernatural knowledge of coming events as it supplies disciples with supernatural endurance and a missionary will."¹

Conclusion.

As we close today, let me ask you, are you looking for dates, or are you preparing for eternity? Do the troubles of the world have you all worked up and fretful about the end of time, or are you looking to the Lord and trusting in Him for your future? In this passage Jesus says no one knows the hour of His return, not even the Son of Man. He will come as a thief in the night, when you least expect it. So why spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out the precise day and hour of the Lord's return. Rather, spend your efforts in living for Jesus here and now. And be ready whenever He comes.

Earnest Shackleton was an extraordinary explorer of the South Pole during what is called the Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration. In 1916 he left behind a few men on Elephant Island while he went off to explore another territory, and he told them he would come back to get them and to be ready when he did. However, when he returned, there was a blockade of ice bergs that wouldn't allow the ship to get into the bay. He was worried about how he would rescue his men.

Then, as if by a miracle, one day an opening occurred in the icebergs. He raced in with the boat, picked up the men who were in fact ready, and they got out just before the icebergs crashed back together. He said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go."

They replied, “We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded one another, ‘The boss may come today!’”

May we always seek to live for Christ in this world. May we make the most of every single day, because it may be our last. And may we maintain a readiness should the Lord return this very hour. The boss may come back today! Amen.

¹F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, Vol. II, p. 841.