



## **“See, I Have Told You Beforehand”**

*Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*

Matthew 24:15-31

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Well, Beloved, we are returning this morning to Jesus’ Mt. Olivet Discourse, His second longest sermon in Matthew, one that is prophetic in nature and which is filled with layer upon layer of exhortation and practical instruction, not only for the disciples of Christ’s day but for us. And I think that is very important to understand. Prophecy is not primarily about just telling the future or trying to figure out all of the myriad of details regarding the future of America, for instance. Prophecy is not given to the people of God to simply be the subject of coffee table discussions or bible studies or an apologetics defense. Prophecy is given as a testimony to the sovereignty of God over His creation, over nations, over events, and over every age. It is given as a warning of what is to come but also as an encouragement to faithfulness, to watchfulness, and to perseverance, and as a great promise of God’s ultimate victory and the open revelation of His glory. So, though prophecy deals with future events, it is immensely practical.

Not only is prophecy immensely practical but it is also intensely pastoral. Jesus’ intent is to prepare his disciples spiritually for the events that are coming, to tell them what is on the horizon and how to stand firm in the coming storm and be ready to meet Him when He returns. Jesus’ approach is pastoral in nature and that is our approach to this text as well. Our goal is not to mine Jesus’ words in order to come up with a clearly defined eschatological system to fit our understanding of the end times but instead to hear and understand the heart of Jesus and of His instruction to His disciples and to us and to respond in faith. So as we get back into this text today, let’s reset the scene that is taking place.

### Resetting the Scene

Remember that Jesus had just finished his blistering indictment of the scribes and the Pharisees, exposing them as religious frauds and false teachers, and warning them to repent because of the judgment that was coming upon them. Then He says to them: “See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who

comes in the name of the Lord.' "" (Matthew 23:38–39, ESV) Your house, the temple, is left to you desolate – devoid of God’s presence, devoid of eternal significance, devoid of eternal worth. Jesus was pronouncing judgment on the temple, and particularly on the false and corrupted Judaism of the day, the Judaism that had become so devoid of truth, that it was worthless. The reality that once existed in Israel and in Judaism – worship divinely revealed, divine prescribed, that pointed to Christ, validated and approved by God in heaven, was now obsolete and worthless because it did not end in Christ. There was no glory left to be associated with the temple because Christ had completely rejected it and its corrupted worship.

Then as Jesus was walking out of the temple area with the disciples, to their surprise and amazement, He tells them plainly that the whole thing was about to be destroyed. Again, completely astonished they asked Jesus: “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3, ESV) To their way of thinking, they are asking one interrelated question. Their mindset is something like this. To their way of thinking, the destruction of the Temple, if that was to happen, and the destruction of the false religion of the Pharisees – the end of their age of rule, was going to coincide with the consummation of Christ’s kingdom, with Him ascending to the throne and with them reigning as kings with Him and the beginning of a new age of Jewish prosperity. They have an entirely earthly perspective on all of this.

But by contrast, Jesus hears two distinct questions that while they are related are not interconnected. When Jesus hears the disciples ask this question, He hears it as: 1) when will the destruction of the temple takes place and 2) what will be the sign of your return in glory and the end of this age, the end of all things? And it is these two questions that we see answered before us in the MT Olivet discourse. Now we saw a couple of weeks ago that the way that Jesus begins to answer the disciples is by giving them an overview of redemptive history, sort of describing the flow of history in verses 4-14. Through that overview, Jesus exhorted the disciples and us to be faithful and to endure – to be faithful and endure through trial and hardship, to be faithful and endure in the days of spiritual deception, to be faithful and endure through persecution and apostasy on a wide scale, to be faithful and endure for the sake of the gospel and its spread throughout the nations. In this overview of redemptive history, the continual refrain is that we should remain faithful and endure. Hard times are coming, Jesus says, and we must not shrink back, we must not fall away, we must not be overcome with fear. We must endure, we must abide in Him and remain devoted to Him. That is the overview of history and now today, in the text that we are looking at, Jesus will speak to

His disciples specifically regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, the time following the destruction of Jerusalem, and the coming of Christ in all of His glory.

So, having given us an overview of redemptive history, now Jesus narrows his focus in verses 15-22 to describe

The Destruction of Jerusalem (v. 15-22) Pick it up with me in verse 15 as Jesus describes the destruction that is coming, saying: ““So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.” (Matthew 24:15–22, ESV) Jesus gets right to the heart of the first question – when the destruction of Jerusalem will be – and He does so by citing the prophet Daniel. He tells them that the disciples would know when the destruction of Jerusalem was upon them and the way that they would know is by the appearance of the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place. What does that mean? Jesus used Daniel’s prophecy to tell of a coming event that would desecrate and defile the temple so profoundly that it would no longer be thought of as a holy place. There was a partial fulfillment of the prophecy by Daniel back in 168-167 BC when a wicked Syrian ruler, named Antiochus Epiphanes, sacrificed a pig on the altar and spread pig’s blood and urine through out the temple and even turned some of the other rooms in the temple as brothels. In addition, he set up an image, an idol, to be worshipped. It was a dark day in Jewish history.

The disciples would have been well aware of the atrocity committed by Antiochus, but by referencing Daniel, Jesus was saying that the compared to what was in store for Jerusalem and for the temple, what Antiochus did would only be a faint picture by comparison. What was coming for Jerusalem would make this historical fact fade in significance.

I want you to see what Jesus tells the disciples to do in light of the approaching destruction of Jerusalem. He tells them to run, to flee, and to get out of Jerusalem as quickly as possible. If you are on your rooftop, He says, get down and don't even waste time going back into the house to retrieve your belongings – run! If you are out in the field, don't waste time by going back for your cloak but flee with the clothes on your back! It will be especially hard for women who are pregnant or who have nursing children. He tells them that they should pray that this day should not come in the winter when the creek beds were swollen with the winter rains, and the fields were often impassable with mud, and when the mountain peaks were covered in snow. And He says to pray that their flight would not be on the Sabbath – not because of any legalistic observance of the Sabbath, but because on the Sabbath, the gates of Jerusalem were closed. He says all of this because, in Christ's words: For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. Now it is expected of every believer that we would be faithful to Christ, even unto death, but there is no virtue in throwing your life away. To stay in Jerusalem would be for the disciples to do just that. There had never been such concentrated tribulation, such horrific and terrible and intense suffering, trouble and crushing as would be poured upon Jerusalem and there would not be this unique and focused destruction and judgment again. Even the tribulation leading up to the return of Christ would not be worse than that which Jerusalem was about to experience – more widespread perhaps, but not worse in intensity.

Let me try to give you a picture of what led up to the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple. There were a great number of factors, all sovereignly controlled by God that combined to bring such a severe judgment upon the Jews. First, around AD 62 or so, the reign of Nero began to take on ominous tones. Nero was not short of self-esteem and as megalomaniac; he regarded himself as a great warrior, poet, minstrel, athlete and architect. He also became a paranoid wacko, seeing a challenger to his throne under every rock, so much so that he had his wife, his mother, and anyone else that he perceived as a threat, put to death. As a self-styled architect, he had grand plans to rebuild and renovate major parts of Rome, especially the Circus Maximus and the areas around it. being opposed by the Roman Senate in his plans, he decided to have a fire set around the area he wanted to rebuild. His arson campaign got out of control, however, and resulted in the destruction of 2/3 of Rome. Needing a scapegoat, he leveled the blame upon the Christians that were in the Roman empire and so began the Neronian persecution of Christians in which Nero used Christian as human torches to light his gardens and the chariot races. In this persecution, both Peter and Paul lost their lives.

As I said, Nero was a crazy man, and increasingly he ignored his responsibilities as emperor in order to tour the Roman Empire, throwing parties and making a fool of himself. It wasn't long before order began to completely break down. In the midst of turmoil and seeing an opportunity to push for independence, the Jews in Jerusalem began to revolt. The grip of Rome on Jerusalem began to unravel. It became an ongoing problem in the Roman Empire. Commissioned by Nero, the Roman general Vespasian, took his army to go and deal with the Jewish problem once and for all by laying sort of a loose siege to Jerusalem. In other words, it was more of a show of force. This is where things start to get crazy. Nero was deposed as an enemy of the state in AD 68. The guy who took over for him was murdered and guy after him, and Rome went through 4 emperors in one year culminating in Vespasian, who returned from the Jerusalem siege to lay hold of the emperorship in Rome, leaving his son, Titus, to finish the job with the Jews.

During this time, as the Romans were laying siege to Jerusalem, three competing Jewish factions arose in Jerusalem, each seeking to take over the government of the city. One of the factions, to exert its control and to force the Jews into open warfare with the Romans, burned all of the grain stores in the city, hoping to use starvation as a motivation for battle. While all of this was going on, Titus, Vespasian's son who was now in command, began to turn up the heat on the Jews. The Jews responded by crowding into Jerusalem, believing that it was invulnerable and that God would never allow the city to fall. As a result, the population of Jerusalem swelled to millions of people.

The army of Titus, complete with idolatrous images and banners that declared the Roman Emperor to be divine, the blasphemy of mortal man claiming to be God -- this abomination of desolation which would render Jerusalem and the temple defiled and desecrated -- ringed the city and began to tear down its walls. Forewarned, most of the Christians fled to a place called Pella, but the Jews in Jerusalem faced destruction unparalleled in history. When Titus entered the city, he was repulsed by what he saw. The power grabbing factions that burned the grain stores set off a severe famine, so great that mothers and fathers cannibalized their children. Pestilence was rampant. Sanitation was non-existent. Corpses were openly rotting in the streets. Brutality between the people of Jerusalem, each scrambling to stay alive, had consumed the city from within. It was an horrific scene.

Titus, who had originally planned to use restraint and to save as much of the architecture of the city as he could, instead determined to level it. Faced with what he regarded to be such

debauched and wicked behavior, and encountering so me resistance, rather than simply subdue it, he determined to destroy the city completely. Gladly the Roman legions put the Jews to the sword and pulled down the stones of the wall and completely razed the temple to the ground, down to the very foundations – burning and savagely destroying everything. The city was reduced to rubble, the carnage and slaughter terrible. Millions of Jews, between 2 -4 million were put to death, 97,000 were taken into captivity. Josephus says that it was “a time of distress unequalled in any previous destruction.” So pleased were the Romans with what Titus had done that thy erected the Arch of Titus in the Forum at Rome to celebrate his victory. It one of only two that remain until this day.

The scene was one of utter chaos and destruction and brutality and it makes sense. Where Christ is rejected there is chaos. It was true of the city that had rejected her king, but the truth is this -- in any human life, all that you are ultimately left with in rejecting Christ is chaos, brutality, wickedness, and distress. That is all that is left to the rejecter of Christ. Where Christ is rejected, all that remains is judgment and that, with horrific and inescapable finality. The coming of Titus in retribution on Jerusalem is a picture, in miniature, of the coming of Christ in judgment at the final hour of human history. How that will look we cannot possibly know in full, but this prophecy is not intended to give us a detailed description but instead to lift up our hearts in expectancy so that we will be found ready when it comes.

But there is something else that we need to see here. I want us to see from this text that being a disciple of Christ does not mean being free from tribulation, or trial, or hardship – either on a global or personal scale. Escapist theology has no place in Christianity. No doubt, some Christians lost their physical lives in the destruction of Jerusalem. But, beloved, the truth is this. Christ does not guarantee immunity from trial and hardship or from their effects, but He does promise that none of those things can eternally separate us from His love and care: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35–39, ESV) God does not promise us freedom from trial but that He will ultimately preserve us through it. That is far greater than the promise of a trial-free life.

In fact, notice one last thing that Jesus says about this time of judgment on Jerusalem: And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. For the sake of the elect, the days of the destruction of Jerusalem, this great tribulation, will be cut short. God placed a limit on the duration of this severe destruction for the sake of His people. He does it so that His elect may be saved, His chosen ones, those whom he specifically loves in this world, may be saved. The word for “saved” here is not only a reference to salvation but is also a reference to being saved from death and destruction. But get the implication of what Jesus is saying. The physical lives of some of His elect would be preserved – why? Would it not be better to be with Christ in heaven? It would. But he preserves the lives of his elect who have already believed so that they may preach the gospel and so, through their witness, the elect from every nation, even some who were in Jerusalem, who had not yet come to faith but whom He preserved through the destruction of Jerusalem, may be saved from eternal death.

How incredible. This thought ought to humble us to our core. Here in the midst of the destruction of His enemies, God acts with providential care and love toward His people. What we see is that Christ rules the world with both His glory and His love for His people in mind. Meditate on that for just a moment and consider just how comforting and encouraging that really is. Here in the middle of this passage on the rightful destruction of His enemies, Christ reminds us of His unfailing, eternal and steadfast love for His own...for us. He rules with us in mind. What an amazing thought. But this is only the first expression of His love for His people in this text. Keep going and I will show you what I mean.

Jesus tells us what happens next. Into this chaos and disorder, the vacuum left by the thorough and definitive destruction of the temple and the Jewish worship, the sacrificial system, the ground will be fertile for the proliferation of false christs and false prophets that Jesus spoke of earlier in the overview of redemptive history in verses 4-14. See what happens as

History Rolls On (v. 23-26) Jesus describes the intervening time in human history between the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of Christ in power and glory by saying: “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.” (Matthew 24:23–26, ESV) Into this spiritual vacuum caused by the destruction of the temple,

because of the Jew's rejection of Christ as Lord and Messiah, will come false christs – false saviors, complete with their false prophets. Mankind is incurably religious and so some version of a god, something to worship, always arises in the human heart and when the object of worship is not Christ, as He is revealed in God's truth, anything no matter how ludicrous is fair game. It gives rise to all of the things that Jesus mentioned in verses 9-12: ““Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.” (Matthew 24:9–12, ESV) Tribulation will continue to grow, fed by the false prophets and the false christs that will infiltrate the world and the church. And again, the fruit of their demonic ministry will be evident in the brutality and apostasy that will define the last days, the days that we are in: “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.” (2 Timothy 3:1–5, ESV)

Here is the truth about false christ and false prophets. They are everywhere – religious leaders, government leaders, social icons, the so-called elite, athletes, actors, singers – and they are appealing to the flesh, especially the ones in the professing church. There will always be men who seek to reinvent Christ, to try to accommodate Him to the whims of fallen men, to make him more palatable to the spirit of this evil age. But the message is clear – Christ is not to be accommodated to men, but men are to be accommodated to Christ. Christ bids a man come and die, to surrender to Him as He is and that will forever be the case. Following an accommodated christ is to follow a false christ who cannot save and who will doom us. But that kind of christ is appealing to the fallen human heart.

Jesus says these false christs and false prophets will arise and be endowed by the evil one to perform signs and wonders that are so convincing so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.” They will lead astray, if possible, the elect, but the whole point is this: IT ISN'T POSSIBLE. This is yet one more promise of the faithfulness and the love of Christ for His people. The aim of the false christs and false prophets is certain: to mislead, to cause you to go astray, to cause you to fall away



from Christ. And it will happen but for one certainty: you have been chosen by God, who has accomplished by grace all that is necessary to keep you for eternity.

Here in one statement, Jesus addresses the two extremes that all Christians have the propensity to gravitate toward. To the one who lives circumspectly, who consciously seeks to please the Lord in the way that they live out the gospel, who given evidence of faithfulness and love to Christ, who esteem His word and yet struggle with fear that they will fall away, He says that it is not possible. In the words of Romans 8: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” (Romans 8:29–30, ESV)

And to those who take perseverance for granted, who let the promises of God’s preserving power fuel apathy and carelessness in them, He says I have told you, be watchful, be alert, don’t believe the falsehood, don’t believe the lies, remain faithful. Don’t be lazy but persevere. It is encouragement mixed with warning.

We have throughout Scripture this continual mingling, this constant tension between the promises of God and responsibilities of believers. Do you see it? What we need to see here is that the means that God uses to ensure that we do not fall away are warnings received with a submissive heart, acted upon in the power of the Holy Spirit which leads to greater faith in the promises of God made to His people. That is how God’s sovereignty gloriously meets human responsibility. Christ will not allow His people to ultimately fall away, He protects their souls by warning us of what is to come and by the power of His Spirit enabling us to believe the truth, to preach the truth to ourselves, to expose the lies and cling to what we know is true in Christ, who we have in our Lord. Apathy toward Christ, the gospel, and discipleship doesn't resemble biblical Christianity. Jesus did not hesitate to call for His followers to persevere as Christians even in the midst of tribulation with the constant promise that He would be with us.

The value of knowing the true Christ, knowing Him as Savior King and Lord, and the value of the gospel is not found in the fact that his people are unfazed by or exempted from the effects of trial and tribulation, not only personally but even on the grand scale, but in that He sticks with

you and you stick with Him in the though it all. There is only One rightful Lord and King and we must abide in Him and cling to Him as we look toward

The Coming of the Son of Man (v. 27-31) As for the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus does not want there to be any confusion. Look, starting in verse 27: “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. “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 heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (Matthew 24:27–31, ESV) The point, I think, is obvious, isn’t it? Christ’s return will not be a secret event known only to an initiated and wise few. It will be obvious, unmistakable, unavoidable, and inescapable. There is no such thing as a secret coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It will occur with universal significance and will be like lightning in the sky. The reference to buzzards is a little hard to understand – it could refer to the way that buzzards in the air signal food on the ground or it could be reference to putrid state of the earth when Christ comes, I don’t really know for sure – but the point is clear, we will not be able to miss His coming.

Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the days in between the destruction of Jerusalem and the day of his return, Jesus will appear in unmistakable fashion. I want you to see, beloved, that there is nothing in Christ’s words that allude to tribulation being limited to a short timeframe or limited only to Jewish believers like some popular endtime theologies. John describes those who endure tribulation as being: “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9–14, ESV) The tribulation

that Jesus refers to is now and it waxes and wanes throughout the earth in various places – we cannot be so Americentric in our thinking, as if all that matters is what is going on in this country – tribulation is now and it will grow, but, praise God, it will culminate in His glorious return.

Listen to these words again: 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 heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

What do we take from these words? In the midst of a rending of the cosmos nothing will be as it is now, almost beyond our comprehension. In a moment, the sun will no longer shine, the moon will go dark, stars will fall from heaven, all the powers of the sky will be shaken and Christ will be revealed in all of His glorious splendor. Before Him the skies and all that is in them will flee and everything will fade to insignificance before the appearing of the King in all of His glory, grandeur, radiance and majesty. The sign of the Son of Man IS the Son of Man. There is no other sign to be sought but He, Himself. That is the sign we are to be looking for. That is what Jesus is saying here.

When He comes, everyone will see Him and those who do not know Him, who do not love His appearing because they do not love Him will mourn when they see Him coming on the clouds of heaven with power and with great glory. All who ignored the pleas of the gospel, who thought that the gospel was foolish or ignorant superstition, will have their excuses and objections silenced forever. The ones who made a mockery of gospel proclamation, who were indifferent, those who preached another gospel, those who persecuted God's people will know in a moment that their doom is sure. The proud, the arrogant, the enlightened, the one who put off closing with Christ for a more convenient day will find themselves groveling before the glory that is Christ, with no hope. The folly of their rejection will be seen with laser like clarity, but too late.

But for those who are Christ's, this will be the day of greatest joy imaginable. He will gather to Himself, the faithful, the ones who have endured, His angels, those "sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14, ESV), will at the sound of a great trumpet call, go and gather the elect from the four corners of the earth, God's elect-those chosen by Him before the foundation of the world, justified fully through the death of Jesus Christ at the cross, called and regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and through grace brought to faith and repentance in Christ, will see Him and rejoice with unimaginable joy. The truth of His mercy to us, of His love for us will explode with joy in our hearts as we are gathered to Him forever and ever. None of His elect will be lost. By His angels, He will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other, from the four corners of the globe. What a day that will be.

Beloved there are really only a couple of questions to be asked and answered. Are you ready for that day? What if it were right now?

Are you ready to meet the king right now? It is the most important question of life. Do you know the salvation that alone is in Jesus Christ? Will you love His appearing?

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