

Chapter 98: The Beginning of the Birth Pains

Matthew 24:1–14

As Jesus prepares to go to the cross, he must prepare his disciples for his departure. In Matthew 24, Jesus begins what has been called the “Olivet Discourse,” where Jesus addresses a number of issues that relate to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, as well as to the end of the age and the return of Christ. In this section, Jesus braces his followers for the difficulties that lie ahead of them; however, he also assures them that his powerful presence will protect them along the way. As Jesus enjoys one of his last private discussions with his disciples, he encourages them to *persevere by the power of Christ*.

The Prophecy against the Temple (Matt. 24:1–2)

At the end of the previous section, Jesus had declared, “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’” (Matt. 23:38–39). Now, at the beginning of Matthew 24, we read that “Jesus left the temple and was going away...” (v. 1). This is an important, if understated, moment, since “Christ was paying, as it were, his last adieu to the *temple*.”¹ France writes, “having entered the temple dramatically and controversially in 21:12–16, he leaves it with an equally emphatic and more far-reaching statement about its future. He is abandoning it, never to return, and after that it has no future except to be destroyed. What has been hitherto the earthly focus of the presence of God among his people is so no longer.”²

Jesus’ departure from the temple echoes the departure of the glory of the Lord from the first temple in Ezekiel 10. The glory of the Lord had departed, and had not returned (in Matthew’s narration of the story), until Jesus returned to cleanse the temple after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 21:12–16. Now, having delivered a prophetic excoriation against the leaders of Israel, Jesus departs from the second temple, just as the glory of the Lord had departed from the first temple after Ezekiel’s denunciation of the religious leaders in Jerusalem (Ezek. 4–9). Just as that first temple was soon to be destroyed by the Babylonians, so also the second temple would soon be destroyed roughly forty years later by the Romans.

The disciples, however, struggle to let go of their attachment to the temple. Jesus had declared that “their house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38), so the disciples point out to Jesus the extraordinary buildings of the temple, apparently seeking for him to reassure them that the old covenant dwelling place of God would remain standing, no matter what.³ Jesus, to emphasize the

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:115.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 886.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 927.

finality of the judgment against the temple, declared that not even one stone would stand upon another (v. 2). Jesus knew that, so long as “their eyes were so dazzled by the splendor of its present aspect,...[that] they could scarcely entertain the hope that the kingdom of Christ would arise,” so Jesus “affirms with an oath, that those things which occupy their attention will quickly perish.”⁴ Jesus therefore not only departs from the second temple, but he promises that judgment will come against it.

The Birth Pains of the Kingdom (Matt. 24:3–8)

After this, Jesus goes to sit on the Mount of Olives (v. 3a). The following discourse, then, is called the “Olivet Discourse,” and it involves Jesus’ private teaching to his disciples (v. 3b). What Jesus says here follows the question posed by the disciples: “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (v. 3c). Calvin shows the connection to the previous passage by explaining that, “having believed from their infancy that the temple would stand till the end of time, and having this opinion deeply rooted in their minds, [the disciples] did not suppose that, while the building of *the world* stood, the *temple* could fall to ruins.”⁵

Yet, scholars struggle to interpret this passage because there is significant debate about whether Jesus is speaking about the destruction of the temple (AD 70) or about the return of Christ at the end of time.⁶ At the two ends of the spectrum, some argue that Jesus is only speaking about the destruction of the temple, a view called preterism. Others (especially dispensational premillennialists) see this as a reference only to the end of the age. Most have seen some kind of interplay between the two, either by interpreting Jesus to speak now of one, and then of the other. The details are complex for these proposed interpretations, but the simplest way of understanding the passage as a whole is to understand this as an example of “prophetic foreshortening, as Hendriksen writes:

By the process of prophetic foreshortening, by means of which before one’s eyes the widely separated mountain peaks of historic events merge and are seen as one, as has been explained in connection with 10:23 and 16:28, two momentous events are here intertwined, namely, *a.* the judgment upon Jerusalem (its fall in the year A.D. 70), and *b.* the final judgment at the close of the world’s history. Our Lord predicts the city’s approaching catastrophe *as a type* of the tribulation at the end of the dispensation. Or, putting it differently, in describing the brief period of great tribulation at the close of history, ending with the final judgment, Jesus is painting in colors borrowed from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.⁷

According to this understanding, both the destruction of the temple *and* the end of the age are in view. Furthermore, this dual focus is intentional, since each event interprets the other. This approach to the text helps us to recognize the impending doom for the original audience as well as the

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:115–16.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:117.

⁶ For a summary of the various views, see Carson, “Matthew,” 548–57.

⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 846–47.

ongoing relevance of this chapter in every subsequent generation.

Jesus begins, then, by warning his disciples not to be led astray by false christ: “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray” (vv. 4b–5). As Calvin observes, “false teachers will henceforth give no less annoyance to the godly than false prophets gave to the ancient people; and...disturbances will be not less frequent under the Gospel than they formerly were under the Law.”⁸ Although Jesus will deal with geopolitical tumult, it is important to note that he starts with the greatest danger to his disciples: those who would claim to be the Christ, in order to lead away those seeking to follow the Christ. The world will rage and roar in many ways, but the greatest danger to believers lies with false teachers who would deceive us about Christ himself.

Next, Jesus does deal with the chaos of the wider world. As Jesus talks about all the events happening within the world, notice how he twice emphasizes that these unruly events do not signal an immediate end of the world. First, Jesus says, “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet” (v. 6). So, when people interpret certain world events as conclusive evidence of the immediate, impending return of Christ, we must return to the words of Jesus to consider those claims with skepticism.⁹

Jesus continues: “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains” (vv. 7–8). Note that there will be two kinds of events that may trouble believers: warfare between nations and natural disasters. Note also that Jesus describes these events as “the beginning of the birth pains.” This is where Hendriksen’s characterization of the destruction of Jerusalem as a type of the final judgment is helpful. Labor is a long process, where the beginning pains may be quite a distance from the final delivery of the new baby. Yet, labor is not a series of unrelated pains, only some of which have relevance to the birth. Rather, all of those pains are a part of the mother’s body preparing to delivery her new child. In the same way, we should not hear Jesus as saying that these are *not* signs, but only that they are *not signs of the immediacy of the judgment*. Rather, they are all connected as a part of how the kingdom is breaking its way into the world—albeit not immediately.

The Perseverance of the Church (Matt. 24:9–14)

Jesus warns, then, that his disciples will not escape the upheavals of the world. The kingdoms of the the earth will not only concern themselves with warfare against other kingdoms, but they will also rage against the church specifically: “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” (v. 9). We will not be left alone to preach the gospel and make disciples quietly, separated from the hatred of the world. Rather, the nations will rage against the church in hatred for Christ’s name’s sake. Yet, as Calvin notes, this will be an opportunity to confirm the truthfulness of the gospel: “It was therefore an authentic seal of the gospel, when the apostles advanced without terror to the tribunals of kings, and there made an open profession of the name of Christ.”¹⁰

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:119.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 852.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:125.

Next, Jesus says, “And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray” (v. 11). This warning is similar to what came earlier, when Christ warned against those who would falsely claim to be the Christ. Here, however, the warning is about a more subtle threat: “in all ages false teachers will arise, to corrupt sound doctrine, as Peter tells us (2 Peter 2:1) that the Church will be no less exposed to this evil under the Gospel than it anciently was under the Law.”¹¹ Further, this will not be only a matter of intellectual error, but there will be practical consequences of this false teaching: “And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold” (v. 12). As the fourth Preliminary Principle of the PCA’s *Book of Church Order* declares, “Godliness is founded on truth....there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.” Therefore, the doctrinal errors that arise will lead by fruitless, sinful living. Orthodoxy (right beliefs) lead to orthopraxy (right behavior), and heterodoxy (false beliefs) lead to heteropraxy (false behavior).

Even so, Christ concludes with two comforting promises. First, he insists that “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 13). This is not a statement that demands believers to exert our own strength in the flesh; rather, it presumes what the Scriptures elsewhere teach, that it is God who is at work in us, and it is God who will persevere us to the end (e.g., Phil. 1:6; 2:12–13). Yet, it does not suggest that God’s grace of preservation and perseverance is given without our toil and struggle. On the contrary, we must suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with him (Phil. 3:10–11).

Second, Jesus promises that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” No matter how persecuted the gospel may be, Jesus’ gospel will be preached throughout the whole world. Again, we may think of the analogy of labor and delivery. No matter how painful the labor process may be, it leads to the ultimate goal of delivering a baby. In the same way, the painful way in which the gospel will proceed throughout the earth is all part of the way in which Christ’s kingdom will fill up the whole earth.

Yet, we should notice that Jesus does not promise that bringing the gospel to every nation will *immediately* trigger the kingdom, but only that preaching the gospel in every nation will come *before* the end: “such worldwide gospel proclamation would not be a matter of a few weeks, months or even years, but would range over a much longer period of time, many centuries.”¹² All of this should give confidence to the individual believer as well as to the church as a whole. Jesus is coming, and his kingdom cannot be stopped. No matter how the nations may rage, and the peoples plot in vain, Christ’s kingdom will indeed trample all his enemies under his feet. He will certainly come again as judge and as the savior of his people, no matter what the world may do to stop him.

Discussion Questions

1. What did Jesus warn in Matthew 23:38–39 about the fact of Jerusalem and Jerusalem’s temple? How significant is it for Matthew to tell us that Jesus “left the temple” (v. 1)? How does this act parallel the departure of the glory of the Lord from the temple back in Ezekiel 10? What do these departures from the temple signify about the future doom of those temples? How do they prepare Christ’s disciples for a new temple that he would raise up at his resurrection?

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:127.

¹² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 854.

2. What are the disciples trying to learn from Jesus in their question in v. 3? What is Jesus' primary concern about his disciples (v. 4)? What role will false christs play in the future (v. 5)? How might wars and rumors of wars discourage Christ's people (v.6)? How might the tumult of the nations and of the earth through wars and natural disasters alarm Christ's people? How do these signs relate to the final return of Jesus?
3. How will the world treat Christ's people after his departure (v. 9)? How will formerly-professing believers within the church treat those who remain faithful to Christ (v. 10)? How will false prophets and teachers affect the church (v. 11)? How will the faithfulness and love of believers be affected (v. 12)? What does Jesus promise for the individual (v. 13)? What does Jesus promise about the spread of the gospel through the world (v. 14)?
4. What part of this passage concerns you? What do you see in the world that matches what Jesus warns about here? What part of this passage encourages you? What do you see in your own life, or in the wider world, that encourages you about the coming of Christ? What is one way that you can faithfully serve Jesus to bring the gospel to the wider world? How do Jesus' words in these passages encourage, provoke, or strengthen you?